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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

VASES: SIX SHORT STORIES

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Vases: Six Short Stories" submitted by Caterina Edwards Loverso in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Supervisor

Date Oct 5, 1973

DEDICATION

To Nadia. You asked me the most important question. You live within me.

ABSTRACT

The six short stories share a preoccupation with memory both as theme--that is, how, what and why one remembers--and as structuring device. Each story records the important sensations and memories that the protagonist's consciousness registers during a crisis or turning point in his or her life. These points occur always in a few hours, though, in one case, these hours are spread over several weeks.

The memories come to the characters in different ways depending on their situation. Thus, both Maria in "The Last Young Man" and Elena in "Winter" are obsessed with the past, but Maria is dominated by it to the degree that she relives her memories no matter what her present activity is, while Elena remembers in a pattern directly related to the cues she is given by objects and people around her. The former remembers sequentially while the latter experiences concurrent layers of memory.

A certain progression in the stories does occur. Maria can only experience the outside world through the men of her life. The "self" that acts and chooses has hardly any existence in her. Jody and Elena, in a less structured milieu, suffer from the same lack of "self."

Victoria, in her inability to fulfill the traditional female role and her desperate efforts to do so, has also lost her "self." ("The Fruit Falls Close to the Tree" gives an outside view of Victoria's confusion. Through male eyes, it appears as classical "frivolity" and "mystery.")

One of the results of the weakened egos for the three younger women is a particular vulnerability to subconscious images and impulses, which become increasingly more intense and dominating. Jody is shown only from the outside at this stage but both Elena and Victoria are seen as gradually losing control of their thoughts and actions.

In "All Life From the Sea" Jody begins to understand her mental state. She makes a choice--to leave her lover, to have a child. By the last story, "Black and White," Jody has only one major flashback and that one only after a great stimulus. She has evolved that "self" and can live for herself. All the other characters have a warped sense of now. Even Gianni, the only male consciousness, lives for the future, with an intense consciousness of his past and from where he sprang. Jody alone lives in the present.

In the first five stories, the narration is limited to the main characters' consciousnesses. In "Sarah," however, at certain points the narration shifts briefly from the inside of Victoria to the outside to observe her actions when she is without consciouness. The further

changes in tense and person through the narration are a device to characterize both the deep schizophrenic split inside Victoria and her different types of memory. The narration of the last story is bound to Jody's apprehension of things. But the narrator has a certain ironic distance that does not exist in the other stories. Jody develops a "self" independent but responsive to things and people. The narration develops a parallel separation from its subject.

PREFACE

"An hour is not merely an hour. It is a vase filled with perfumes, sounds, plans and climates. What we call reality is a certain relationship between the sensations and the memories which surround us at the same time."

Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past

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THE LAST YOUNG MAN

Maria finally found the suitcase in a corner of the cellar, behind the empty wine barrels. She wiped off the dust with a rag she kept beside the washing machine. The suitcase was bigger than she remembered. It felt, as she carried it up the narrow stairs, as if it were made of tin and cardboard. "This looks a bit funny beside yours," she told Luigino, "yours are such new ones with their red, hard walls. Look, the sides cave in." Just looking at his suitcases she could see Edmonton airport with its big, empty spaces and flourescent lights. Her suitcase (the dull, green sides scratched) belonged in the baggage rack of a third class train compartment, crammed with people and noise.

Luigino only laughed. "What would be funny would be wasting money on another one when I can use yours. Besides, it'll hold a lot of stuff." She fished out a thick string from her junk drawer in the kitchen.

"You can tie this around it."

He put his arms around her and kissed her quickly. His cheeks brought the synthetic scent of pine, the smell of pine, the smell of the path laden with pine needles, winding up the hill that overlooked the village to the

Church of the Sacred Heart.

How many times had he evoked the smell, the taste, the feel of her home? They would sit in the evenings, she mending clothes or sewing on buttons and he, opposite her at the table, drinking wine. Talking of his village, his family, the manure fight he once had with Beppi, the difficult birth of a calf, the skill needed in the theft of prickly pears. Her stitches would patch the tears, the holes in the clothes; his words the tears and holes in her memory.

"What will I do without you?"

Instead of answering, he pulled on his new leather jacket. "I'll be right back." He had only one last call to make. He had said goodbye to most of his friends the night before. It had been almost like the old days. All her young men sitting around the table, tossing back glass after glass of Beppi's rough, red wine, singing bawdy songs and joking with her. Luigino had insisted she waltz with him to the Strauss record though he didn't know how to dance at all and they ended up stumbling all over the kitchen until Sandro cut in. Almost like the old days. Only each one of them had had a wife beside him. They were all nice women but somehow the laughter wasn't as long or as loud as she remembered it.

Now the door closed behind Luigino and she stood alone in the silent empty house; feeling her stomach, a balloon, gradually distend with fear. No. No, it was

Thursday of Holy Week and she had still not baked the panettone. She pulled a dozen eggs out of the fridge and methodically broke and emptied them into her largest bowl. But the suitcase in the empty hall was before her.

It was springtime when her father gave her the suitcase, the land not yet burned into harsh redness by the sun. First, he gave her a thick, gold chain and a round medallion of the Virgin to hang from it. Then, he motioned to his wife, who left the room and returned with the suitcase. "You'll be needing this." She accepted the gifts with a kiss. It wasn't until after supper, when her sisters and stepmother had returned to the kitchen with the dishes and her brothers were out walking under the olive trees that she cried. She and her father sat at the long, empty table staring at the cake crumbs and the purple wine stains on the tablecloth. A breeze carried the scent of orange and lemon blossoms through the open window.

"I can't go. It's too far," she said to him, knowing she was his favorite. Seeing the tears run down his brown cheeks and into his full, white beard.

But he only shook his head. "He's your husband. You've been married six months."

"It's not true. He's been gone for most of those months. Papa help me. He was a stranger and with me for so little time. He had to leave and we . . ." She heard her voice rise and crack. The tears dried on her father's cheeks and he was as immovable as the rock wall that

bordered the orchard.

"You are no longer a girl, a child. You must follow your husband. It's only right."

"But I am . . . I am still a girl. You have to believe me. I swear. It was my time of month and I . . . He's not my husband not really . . : How can you send me off so far? How?"

A light passed through his blue eyes. "He's a good man. Do you think I would have let you marry him if I hadn't taken steps to investigate him thoroughly? Canada is far away but not too far for me to know what kind of life he was leading. What you say may be true but it doesn't concern me. You have lived in his parents home for six months. That is enough."

She turned away from him with angry words. He was deserting her because he was afraid of the gossip if she didn't join her husband. He cared more for the opinion of the village than for her.

Since she was five years old and her mother had died, she'd obeyed him in everything. Washing the younger children's diapers, tending them, cleaning the house--whatever he ordered. When he'd brought home a wife, she had respected her. When he'd forbade her the companionship of Alfredo, whom she had loved, she'd submitted. But Canada . . . Canada was far away, on the other side of the world, and she was filled with fear.

She didn't think of Beppi. The courtship had been

so short, and all through it they had never been alone. You couldn't really count those evenings her stepmother stayed up with them though she did fall asleep by the stove. Mamuccia'd wake up each time they stopped talking. She had kept thinking that she could never be joined to this man so different from herself--so dark and quick moving. His suit was too tight and his hair stuck straight up out of his head like a rooster.

Why, she was promised to the richest young man of the village, her godmother's son. Not officially, of course, but Maurizio had asked her to wait until he finished his studies and he came to visit her each trip home. His long, thin fingers were clammy whenever he touched her, but his voice was soft as gentle Italian words poured out of his small, precise mouth. Beppi only spoke dialect but he acted as if there could be no doubt of her accepting him, speaking of their splendid future together in America. When they went to have the legal papers for the wedding drawn up, she wasn't thinking of what was happening. She was trying to understand his intenseness. He had the brightness of the sun at noon shining on the sea, hurting her eyes. When he exploded at the town official who said the papers couldn't be done at such short notice, instead of being embarrassed by his shouts, as her father was, she was mesmerized by his fist pounding the official's shiny desk over and over.

And so it went, and suddenly she was in her cousin's

rather tight wedding dress, Beppi was putting a ring on her hand; the priest was blessing them.

"It was so sudden, I didn't have time to think. I didn't understand what it meant until I saw those immigration papers. How can you desert me now, the one time I need you?"

Her father did not answer her anger, the bitter words, the resentment of years behind them. He spoke in a heavy, solemn voice. She must try. Try. If it was absolutely intolerable she could come home, but he was sure it would not be. She must try. There was no way out.

The dough was mixed. White flour dusted the table and trailed in streaks on the yellow linoleum. She couldn't remember spilling the flour or adding any of the other ingredients. Sprinkling more flour on the table, she rolled the heavy dough out of the bowl and began kneading it. It wasn't quite the right colour. She'd forgotten the orange peel. She lifted it back into the bowl. Her father had often quoted some proverb about making cakes. What was it? No, she couldn't remember. Strange how she had feared coming to Canada above anything else, and now the only thing she regretted was her angry words even when she had kissed him for the last time at the airport. She had broken the completeness of her obedience, broken the order of things, an order as dated and superfluous now as his wide trousers or handkissing--Ti

bacio la mano but nevertheless one so solid, straight and unyielding, like the rock walls that had divided the fields for centuries.

The plane was noisy and, when she dared, she watched the engine propellers with apprehension. She tried to eat but ended up vomiting it all into the paper bag the stewardess gave her. By the time the plane reached Edmonton, she was so weak she could hardly stand. When she saw Beppi, his face pressed against the wall, his black hair sticking up, she heard her father's words and started to turn back. But shoving aside the uniformed man at the door, Beppi ran to her and grasped her in his arms. "My wife. My treasure."

Her fingers sank into the heavy yellow dough. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't remember any sequence, only disjointed scenes. Being kissed by a younger, softer version of Beppi, who called her sister and was identified as Luigino. Sitting in the backseat of a huge car, Beppi's arm around her, his hand clutching her shoulder. An enormous building with glittering domes that reminded her of a picture she had seen in a book at school of the heathen's blaspheming place--drawing up opposite it and stopping. "This, this is where you live?"

Beppi laughed, "No, my silly, little pigeon. That's the Ukrainian church. This," his hand curved grandiosely "is our house, our home and our castle."

Her heart crashed from her throat to her stomach.

The house was small and seemed about to fall apart. The paint was chipped and patchy. The stairs up to the front door were cracked. The tiny front yard was littered with old tires. Why, any of the houses in her village was better than this. At least, they had thick, strong stone walls rather than flimsy wood ones.

"Is this my Canada?" she asked.

But, as if the house wasn't enough, while she was being helped out of the car, the rickety front door opened and, it seemed, dozens of young men flowed out. Short ones, tall ones, thin, fat, ugly, handsome. And they all stared at her! She who had hardly ever spoken to a man alone. They were lining up, waiting to kiss her!

She cowered back against Beppi. He laughed and pushed her forward. "You see. I wasn't exaggerating Isn't she as beautiful as a madonna? None of you, none, could do as well as I did. Went to Italy. Forty days was all I had. So determined to get married I would have taken anyone--even a whore--as long as I didn't have to wash one more shirt. And look what I won. A treasure."

She was defenceless. If only her father knew. "Who are they?" she whispered as the youths busied themselves with her suitcases.

"Didn't I tell you, my love? They're our boarders. They live with us, in the basement. Edmonton is a growing city. Housing is almost impossible to find, so, you see, even if I wanted to I couldn't turn them out--not our

paesani--could I?"

She felt at that moment, before even stepping into the house, that she would never be able to endure it; Edmonton would never be her home.

Having divided the dough and put the different lumps into the greased pans, she covered them with a dish cloth. Skirting the suitcase in the front hall, she threw open the front door. It was almost warm for a spring afternoon. "Ernesto, Gabriella, Liliana, where are you all?" The trees had only begun to bud, the grass was still yellow and dried. The street was empty and coated with a thick layer of dust. She called again, louder. From around the corner of the house, Liliana appeared, leading Lella, the baby, by the hand. "Where were you? I was worried. I hadn't heard anything for the longest time."

"We were playing."

"At what?"

"Nothing much."

"Where's Ernesto?"

"He went off with Mike on his bike."

"Be sure to watch your sister."

"I know."

Instead of going back in, she sat down on the porch steps and watched her daughters, their jeans muddied and stained, disappear again around the corner of the house. She had learned to bear some of it. She had learned to love Beppi--his kindness, his openness, to see

him as her protector and to feel happy he had found her. She had learned to like all the young men. Actually, there had been only five of them, besides Luigino. Luciano, Sandro, Eduardo, Vico and Rudolfo. They had treated her with so much courtesy and respect she knew even her father would have approved. She'd been the only woman in their lives really. Their only contact with their mothers and sweethearts was by mail. They had trouble meeting Canadian girls and the whores they picked up on weekends didn't count. They became her companions and guardians against the long, dark evenings while the children slept and Beppi worked the three to eleven shift.

But she had not learned to make Edmonton her home. She hadn't learned how to be a part of it. It was like the Ukrainian church they used to live across from. It was a church of her religion and it was beautiful. But it was still strange and frightening. She could never pray there. She needed cherubs and gentle madonnas like those that adorned the walls of the Church of the Sacred Heart, not frescoes of damned souls burning in hell.

Beppi would be angry with her sometimes for not learning English. He made friends at work and wanted to bring them home. But she had no interest in these friends, so big and noisy and eager to slap her on the back, or their wives with their drinking and ridiculous childish clothes. She always exchanged greetings with her neighbors, when she saw them, but that was all. There was

an old Ukrainian couple on one side with dour, doughy faces who could barely speak English themselves. On the other there was a young Canadian family who, according to Liliana, lived on weiners, hamburgers, ketchup and marshmallows. They would send their children out to play, in the middle of the day, lock their doors and make love so loudly you could hear their cries out in the garden.

Oh, she had to admit the countryside was pretty, the mountains were splendid, and the city was improving over the years. There were a few decent buildings now and you could even buy what you wanted in the stores rather than having to send to Italy for sweaters and shoes. But, at night, all through the years, she dreamt the same dream--over and over again. She was following a narrow, stone path, which was slippery from wear. She had to walk slowly so as not to slip but she could feel herself drawing nearer to the village. She smelt the salt spray and the scent of fig trees. It was just around the corner. But when she turned that corner, instead of the village, she found Edmonton and the first flakes of snow falling.

Winter--that was the worst. Being locked into the house for months until her very thoughts were frozen into the shape of the rooms and the furniture, while each venture out into the cold was a submission to a physical assault. Her young men had kept her from going mad in the long, silent evenings of winter. But Luigino was the last one and today was his last day.

"Ah, I didn't hear you drive up." She jumped up quickly.

"What were you thinking about?" He opened the door for her.

"Of how you're taking away the last chance of our going home."

Luigino bent and pushed the suitcase to the side of the hall. "What can I say? We all agreed since Papa was ill, I would be the best one to run the farm. Beppi didn't want . . ."

"I know. I know." She went to check how the panettone was rising. "Maybe in a year or two, we'll have saved enough money . . ."

He followed her. "How many of our friends went back and failed and had to return? And you did try last summer."

"I know." There was no work for unskilled workers either in her village or his. "It would be silly," Beppi had said, to settle in Torino or Milano. If we can't be near home we may as well be in Canada where a man can earn a decent wage. Where he can be free of all bureaucracy and stupid conventions that rule life over there and never change. Free of the unending kissing-ass to the man who has a bit more. Free . . ."

Freedom. That was what kept Beppi in Edmonton. She was sure if they went back that they could make do as

her brothers and sisters did. Freedom. What did it have to do with her?

The pannettone had only begun to rise. "Maybe things will get better there. Maybe they are better. You must tell us at once."

His hand touched her shoulder. "I must hurry. Beppi will be here soon."

She stayed in her kitchen, trying to put a broth on the stove but moving very slowly. She could see only her father's faded blue eyes. Suddenly, Lella was there, demanding a cookie, and there were muddy footprints in a train across the linoleum. She was a beautiful child. With her long, thin legs, round brown eyes and innate yet hesitant grace she was more akin to the young cariboo Maria'd once seen at the game farm than to either of her parents. Maria had poured all the love and attention on this child; when the first two were babies, she had been so busy caring for the young men, she had had to leave them in their cribs to amuse themselves for hours. She bent down to hug Lella but the child ran to the other side of the room, clutching her cookie. "Funny Mummy."

She straightened up. "You know you shouldn't wear those shoes inside. Now your poor mother has to clean the floor again. Aren't you ashamed?"

Lella listened to her, standing on one thin leg, her head cocked. "Funny Mummy, you no speak too good."

Maria tried to make her repeat in ITALIAN, according

to the family rule, but the little girl kept jabbering away in English until she got her fingers around two more cookies, then, she ran out the back door.

Ernesto and Liliana hadn't liked Italy during their visit last summer, complaining about everything, especially the lack of indoor plumbing and television, but at least, she had been able to make them speak Italian. Lella was more stubborn. It wasn't the first time she pretended not to understand. Already she was growing away from her. Surely her children were part of her and she--well, she was a fig tree growing under a hot sun. But though she tried to think such thoughts, she remembered how they had all been born into Februarys of ice and snow and how each winter they played for hours in that malevolent cold that she couldn't stand for even a few minutes. She saw them pink cheeked and laughing as they finally came home and began shedding mittens, scarves and boots.

"Isn't that brother of mine ready yet?" Beppi had crept up behind her without her hearing him. He rubbed his rough, unshaven chin on her cheek.

"Beppi!" She moved away, "You're early."

"Better too early than too late." He took off his jacket and began unbuttoning his work shirt.

"Your boss didn't mind?"

"I told him I felt sick. He knew. He's a good guy. We must invite him to dinner soon."

"Here I am. Ready." Luigino was wearing his new

black suit. Beppi went to finish changing.

"I'll call the children, to say goodbye."

She started crying as Luigino kissed each of the children. Ernesto and Liliana held his hands, their faces serious. They loved their even-tempered uncle who often, too often, came home with candy-stuffed pockets. Lella, however, headed for the back door as soon as she was released.

"Ah Lella mia," Maria caught and picked her up, "don't you understand--your uncle is going away--far far away--forever." Lella stared at her solemnly.

When they got outside, Beppi was already in the driver's seat of the car. Ernesto's friend Mike was leaning against the front of the house, watching everything and chewing gum. Maria kissed Luigino goodbye again. "Don't forget go to and see my father. He's very old." Turning away, drying her cheeks with a handkerchief, her eyes met Mike's. He was staring at her intently, his jaw moving in slow motion.

Luigino swung her old, battered suitcase into the trunk on top of the red ones. "I guess you'll just have to learn English."

"She'll have to learn sometime. I've been telling her that for years." Beppi was leaning out of the car window.

"What I have to learn is not to care about the place--I have to learn to pray everywhere." But no one was

listening to her, not even Mike. Luigino had got into the car and closed the door behind him.

Maria picked up Lella, who had been heading for the street this time. "Your uncle's leaving." And carried her up to the porch. "He's going to see your granddaddy." They waved goodbye together.

SARAH

For hours, Victoria had been trying to think, to remember so she could piece together the pattern of her life but she had managed only to smoke, to walk back and forth, and to blacken out, with a felt pen, every face in six back issues of Vogue.

"As a child . . ."

She had to understand.

"As a child, I found trees, animals--certain animals: cats, toads, spiders--much more interesting than people. My only human friend was Sister Theresa of the Precious Blood who lived in the convent next door and shared most of my opinions about people. I would climb our big beech tree and watch her take her daily walk in the convent garden. With her billowing skirts and long pointed nose she resembled a giant black and white bird. She would nod, birdlike, when she saw me and come to visit me when she could, though that wasn't often. Once, when she came, she brought a dead bat that had been found in the convent. The furry ball with its immense wings fascinated me and I awoke in the middle of the night to

find myself in our dirt cellar holding the bat in one hand and a torn-off wing in the other. I was surprised but not frightened. I often walked in my sleep and woke up in the cellar. I put the bat with its wing back behind the boxes where I had hidden it before and ran back to my cold bed. The next day, I pulverized the bat's body with my brother's baseball bat."

A nice story. It had scored her points with Michael. But it was no good remembering like that--the words running cold and away from her.

A picture of her, ten years old, a thin streak of a child holding a dead bat by the wings was stuck to a corner of her dresser mirror opposite the one of Michael. She crouched on the end of her bed staring at the picture--staring until it grew and filled the mirror.

The child began to move. It dropped the bat and stretched longer and thinner until its legs were like extra long match sticks under the crinolined skirt. The younger self--so pitiful with its lank, stringy hair and crooked glasses--gazed out at Victoria and began to cry great cartoon tears. Its voice though was calm.

"I didn't want to go to the dance. My mother made me. She has illusions of my suddenly becoming popular. It's important to her. I stood there and stood there. Everybody was dancing except me. No one asked me. When I got home, my first period started. For years I'd worried

about it--wondering if I was weird or something because all my friends had them--but not me! I locked myself into the bathroom. Stood naked in front of the mirror and smeared the blood on my forehead."

But as the child spoke, it was changing. The tears dried up. Breasts evolved and layers of flesh were added. The hair took on a more stylish shape. Suddenly, the glasses were gone and it had sprouted false eyelashes. It was smiling a broad, fixed smile, batting green eyelids, clutching a mass of long-stemmed roses. Disembodied hands were lowering a paste crown on its head. "Oh, I never in a million years!" smile stretched wider. "I'm so excited! My wildest dream--Miss Calgary . . . I'm so . . . ." Tears flowed now pear-shaped and glittery, so perfectly planted on the reddened cheeks.

Victoria jerked her head away. This wasn't the way. She had to get closer, she had to get into the experience. How? As she turned back, that pointed, false face still smiled from the mirror-screen. Quickly, she moved to touch--to caress it but her fingers felt only cold silvery slippiness. "Remember. Remember. Remember." She crushed her face against the other one and, as the two met, something gave way inside her.

"You know too much sun causes cancer."

Lying in the heat of the sun in Karl's backyard,

pulling leaves off an adjacent caragana bush and piling them on my naked belly. Karl's voice a consistent drone blending with the far off sounds of children and lawn-mowers. Again, a sentence separates, drifts over to me. "Did you hear me? Sun is bad for you."

I sit up, scattering torn leaves. "Bullshit. The sun of a thousand Alberta summers couldn't give anyone cancer. It's not direct enough."

Elena and Karl are sitting in the shade of the garage. Not from fear of cancer but because she, dark hair and eyes aside, has such delicate white skin. ("I take moon baths" she'd boast, "They're better for me"--and she would, though her mother raised almighty hell whenever she found her lying naked on her bed, soaking in moonlight.) "Suit yourself then. Get all wizened and wrinkled before your time."

"Buzz off Karl." I lie down again, this time on my stomach so the grass tickles my face. Karl talks too much. Always. Already he's back in the midst of a long treatise on folklore--highlighted by a Freudian interpretation of Little Red Riding Hood--all touched off by Elena's joke that he is under her spell. He is only tolerated because of Elena. He seemed to make her happy and in all the time we'd been friends, I'd rarely seen her happy. I met her in the seventh grade, just after we moved from the convent. She didn't climb trees or like spiders or graveyards but she admired me for that.

"You're unique," she would say "marvelous." We became blood brothers.

So, I lie in Karl's yard, falling asleep. Suddenly, I'm jerked right awake. My entire right arm feels as if it is being pulverized in a giant iron pincer. I'm screaming and keep on screaming. My arm looks no different than it ever did, but the pain! Karl and Elena sit by the garage, looking amazed. "I can't stand it. Help me!" Elena is immediately up and beside me. She grabs my hand and holds it. Slowly, the pincers dissolve. "It's terrible. Awful."

"I don't understand. What's wrong?"

"The pain . . ."

"We thought you were playing some new role. You know, when you get bored . . ."

The pain ebbs away. "What could it be? What?"

"In your arm? A cramp. Rheumatism?" Her hand moves from my hair to my cheek. A gentle caress.

"It was awful."

At home, mother crying, her face bloated. Josie, my younger sister, making coffee, wearing a smug expression. "What's wrong?" My mother's sobs from the living room grow louder.

Didn't you know?" Clattering the spoon importantly, she savours the drama. "Paul was in an accident. His arm was very badly crushed. They probably won't be able to save it."

I hold my arm out in front of me. Under the tanned skin, red splotches, carrying the memory of the pain, form and fade.

At supper, several days later, after learning that Paul wouldn't lose his arm, I tried to tell the family about my experience. No one listened. They started betting on which teams would be playing in the Grey Cup. Except for my grandmother, down from Smokey Lake because of the emergency. She listens.

"So, you felt a pain, 'ey?" We're doing dishes, mother and I, and she watches. "I knew it. I knew it would happen sooner or later." She respreads her long skirts, and smiles to herself. "It's in the family, the blood. Haven't I told you, told you?" She had always relished telling us stories about the reputed witches in our ancestry. In the eighteenth century the family was nearly wiped out by a series of trials. Four sisters--all burned.

"Don't encourage her." Mother is aggressively. normal and Canadian. Grandmother is one of the trials in her life. I'm the other.

"You Victoria," Grandmother continues as if she hadn't been interrupted, "How often I told you--not that anyone listens to an old woman--you look just like my father's aunt. Everyone knew it for sure, she was a witch. I was only a child but . . ."

My mother begins muttering about ignorance and superstition.

"I can remember her. She was proud and beautiful."

Mother shoots me a patronizing look. "Victoria's supposed to resemble her?"

"And fascinating."

My mother laughs.

Victoria focused back on the room, the mirror, the image again. The high school girl she'd been. She stared into that girl's frightened eyes, so magnified by the thick glasses and black, Cleopatra style lines.

That had been the beginning of it all. Yes. After that she had secretly thought of herself as a witch. She'd only practiced very childish, minor things. At school, in the halls at noon hour, she would sometimes get three or four girls to lift another girl with their little fingers by putting them into a semi-trance. That is, if Jody wasn't around; she'd giggle and break the mood. Once Mother Superior came around the corner just when Victoria had got to the "body is dead" chanting stage. Mother Gabriel didn't say a word till Elena (the body) was about three feet off the ground. "Girls!" she bellowed, "girls!," and effectively snapped everyone out of the trance. Elena was dropped. She claimed the fall ruined her back forever.

Victoria smiled remembering. The pale, bony face in the mirror smiled back. There'd been nothing else for about two and a half years, not until about a week after

she came back from Toronto and the Miss Canada Pageant. (A trip, which, for some reason, she couldn't remember at all.)

Then, her first seance.

Victoria stubbed out her cigarette. Leaning back on the headboard, she closed her eyes and concentrated.

Sitting in the semi-darkness, holding hands, left under right, waiting. Avoiding Forrest's eyes. He's supposed to be the medium but he looks like a junior executive. Every time he calls on the spirits I feel like giggling. The room's small and with sixteen people in it, stuffy. I wonder if it would be polite for me to ask if I could open a window. Forrest's call has become a chant. Gradually, I feel. I become aware--of something. On the other side of the wall behind me. Malice. A soured vitality. It moves through the wall. Behind me, it inches closer.

Intrigued, afraid, I don't oppose it. I open my mind.

Immediately, Victoria began to tremble. A tear slid from an unseeing amber eye across her tensed cheek. She arched her back and then relaxed into a slump where she began to moan. The moan became laughter which, in turn, died out. Everyone watched, amazed. She spoke, not in her normal, musical voice but in a strange, thick, lumpy, insolent voice.

"My name is Sarah . . ."

No sign of Sarah in the mirror. She was the one thing it couldn't reflect back to be analysed. Instead, the model she was at that time, so carefully pieced together from jars and boxes. The image shone at her with all the plastic unreality of the advertising face. Her mother had a scrapbook somewhere crammed full of her with that face, her body contorted around varied products, her mouth always smiling. If you flipped through the pages fast you could see an insane silent movie of Victoria, twisting herself around and in all the treasured objects of the day.

The day after the seance, she began an assignment modeling bathing suits in the lounge of the International Hotel. Usually, before any job, she would look in the mirror and repeat five times "I am beautiful." Not that she thought she was but . . . it helped. This evening the words wouldn't come.

"I can't go out there." The heavy wig pressing on my head, like a weight. The two pairs of false lashes making it difficult for me to see unless I hold my head at exactly the right angle.

Cindy, the other model, smiles patronizingly. "Don't be silly. Of course you can."

"All those horrible, balding overfed . . . men

with their widelapeled suits and their wide ties and their wide bulging eyes. Staring. We may as well be strippers."

Cindy stops adjusting her ringlets. "You're being silly Vicki." She knows I hate being called by that name. "Strippers! We're merchandising--promoting a product just like most of them. I don't understand you. I mean, you're really weird sometimes. This is such a nice place and the bread alone . . ."

"Come off it. You know we're not selling the product this time."

"My goodness, Vicki," her blue eyes widen and her perfect little pink mouth forms a mock pout. "If I had your figure, I'd want to show it off."

She pats me on the bust, in a friendly way, as if to pacify me.

I move away to contemplate my reflection in the mirror again. Still monstrous.

"Don't worry, Vicki. You'll knock 'em dead. Those eyes of yours! They make you look like you eat people. Alive!"

Sarah. Am I still carrying her within me? Perhaps. The fear of not being beautiful enough leaves me. Why should I care about those petty eyes hazy from over-drinking? Why should I care if they look at me or not? I'm different from them. Better. I know and feel things they never could. I have powers within me.

The eyes in the mirror were bolder, deeper. The image, for the first time had a confident, formal look. It was as if she had become a card from the Tarot deck (the high priestess) that could be peeled off the mirror surface and played with. Was that how she'd seemed to others? To her friends the first time she told them?

"Sarah helps me."

"I don't know if that's a good thing." Jody's blue eyes are serious.

"Why?"

She makes a face. "I don't know. It doesn't seem right."

"You don't believe what I said happened, happened?"

"Heavens Victoria. I've known you long enough not to doubt your sincerity. Your basic sincerity anyway. You admit yourself you were unconscious at the time. You only know what they told you . . . I just don't believe in spirits. I think there must be some other, rational explanation . . . . Maybe, oh, I don't know."

"She said she lived in eighteenth-century England."

"And--"

"And she's in hell now."

Jody lets out a laughing snort. Elena, who has been smoking in the corner, smiles. "I don't even believe in hell."

I shrug my shoulders. "I'm not a theologian. I'm

just Victoria. I'm only trying to tell you . . . I've sensed her presence ever since . . . I know she exists."

"I don't want to believe in hell." Elena tilts her head to one side, her dark green eyes serious. "Sometimes, in the winter, you know, on the twenty below days, I get so cold--right to the marrow of my bones. I think about Dante's Inferno and how the ultimate torture is being trapped in an enormous frozen lake. I get frightened. This real panic inside. It seems so close. And then, I can't warm up--no matter how hot the room is or how many clothes I'm wearing. Not until . . ." She shoots us a small knowing smile, the ends of her mouth almost curling under instead of up "until David holds me and his warmth seeps into me."

"Speaking of David." Jody's suddenly involved again. "How did that party on Saturday go?"

"Crummy. Karl was there. So long since I'd seen him . . ."

As I relax, letting the conversation flow past me, I sense shadows of emotions in the room, shadows of people. Or perhaps spirits. The intensifying presences converge and hover, like an aura, around Elena.

"What did he do? Leave?"

"No . . . You know Karl." He was perfectly at ease, as if nothing had happened. It's been ages. I guess he sort of avoided me but . . ."

"Just a minute you guys." They turn towards me,

surprised at the interruption. "I've got a feeling . . ." I take Jody's hand. "Come on Elena. Give me your hand."

Elena puts both her hands behind her back. "Why? A seance? Not on your life."

"There are spirits . . . here . . . in this room! They want to be heard."

"Sarah?" Jody seems amused.

"No. Elena, your hand."

"No! No. I don't want to."

"I thought you didn't believe."

"I don't. But I don't want to find out I'm wrong."

Jody laughs. "I don't mind trying."

"But they seem to want to come through Elena. They're not interested in me or you."

Jody looks skeptical. Elena's face--impassive.

"Open yourself. Let go."

Elena stands up and runs around turning on lamps that aren't already on. "I don't believe in spirits. But if there are any here--I want you to go away!" She pauses behind an armchair. "Scram!" She speaks to the air. Then she smiles her pretty little girl smile, perhaps at her game, but the smile becomes a grimace. "What a horrible smell! Can you smell it?" We both shake our heads.

"Really bad. Like . . . like Banff Hotsprings." I don't comment on that.

Jody asks innocently "Like sulphur?"

How could she have been so stupid? The flat, mirror eyes were gloatingly secure. She should have seen it as a warning, rather than a sign for the unbelieving.

"I've never tried this before," I tell George. He and Jody are quite a new thing and this party at David's is the first time I've met him.

"Really?" George looks at me in amazement, smoothing his sparse mustache. "You probably won't get high the first time." He says this in a condemning tone and begins biting his nails, as if unnerved at being part of such an amateur group.

"I've taken a lot of aspirins and antihistamines though."

"Doesn't count." Elena has overheard. She's wearing a white, drifty caftan. Her hair hangs down her back like a black satin band. "Can you pass the matches?" She lights several candles and switches off the lights, touching David every time she passes him. He's busy with a pipe, tinfoil and one of Jody's bobbypins.

Michael, sitting in full lotus beside me, touches my hand. "You seem nervous."

"I guess." I'm happy. We seem to be a couple and that makes me feel on top of things. He's an extraordinary man in any crowd. Mind you, he works at standing out. His long, thin body always elegantly dressed (embroidered shirts, long silk scarves) to the

point of foppishness. He has a shoulder-length Prince Valiant hair cut with each hair always rigidly in place, as if he uses hairspray. His face, instead, seems imprecisely chipped from stone. He's a friend of Elena's from Edmonton. A nebulous friend. Neither of them seems much interested in the other. She introduced him to me about a week ago. To my surprise--I was beginning to think I couldn't click with any man--our vibrations met and fused. We can even talk to each other.

"We're ready." David holds up the pipe for inspection. On it, he lays a minute piece of hash, then lights up.

"Shit." Elena bobs up, "I forgot to put the music on."

Michael hands me the pipe, holding the toothpick while I inhale.

"I hope I didn't miss my turn." Elena's caftan floats over David and Michael's faces as she sits down.

"Stoned already?" Jody's amused. She's usually the one with the most enthusiasm and bounce.

"No. I get high at the thought of getting high. It's so great."

David pulls her hair over her eyes. "Nut."

Why don't we sing this song all together
Open our heads and let the pictures flow
And if we sing the song all together
Then we will see where we all come from

Jody sings along with the record waving her hands in

time to the music. Her hands shoot out farther on one joyous passage, knocking the pipe out of George's hand as he passes it to her.

"Shit."

"Jesus Christ, Jo."

Everyone, except Michael and I, start scrounging around on the floor to find the lost cube of hash. "I didn't expect it to taste so bad."

Michael nods.

"You don't dig this sort of thing much, do you?"

He shrugs his shoulders but says "no". I wonder why he's here.

George finds the cube and the pipe starts its rounds again.

> My face is turned a deathly pale
> You're talking to me through your veil
> Please, carry the lantern high.

"The last time I got stoned I was completely wiped out. I thought I was being chased by colossal grey cookies."

"Till you were foiled by a crumb-maker?" David sugests to Jody.

"Well, no."

"Till she bravely turned around and tried to reason with them." George volunteers in a superior tone. He takes the pipe. When he inhales, he makes a whistling sound. He passes it to me, his cheeks puffed and his eyes slightly crossed.

I inhale. The hash nearly jiggles off again, my hand is shaking so much when I pass the pipe on. I concentrate on trying to make myself stop.

> The serpents sleep, the doors are wide,
> You hear the sighing of my heart;
> It never parts,
> Please carry the lantern high.

The room blurs before me, an abstraction of colors, colors which form lacy patterns that burn bright, then sink into darkness. Darkness containing fainter but more terrible forms. Staring. Waiting to devour. Reaching out with clammy hands to grasp. I try to push them away.

"What's wrong?" Michael asked. Victoria was standing. She didn't answer. The shaking stopped. Her body stiffened. David took the pipe from Elena and laid it aside, saying he thought they'd better stop. George complained no one was high yet. Victoria moaned, then began to laugh. Elena touched her arm. "No! You stinking bitch!" Jerking away as if she'd been burned.

"That's not Victoria's voice," Jody whispered. "And her face! Look at it. We've got to do something."

Before anything could be done, Victoria flung herself on George, still sitting on the floor, wrapped her hands around his throat and began to throttle him, her fingers turning white from the strain. Her strength was prodigious. David and Michael each grasped one of her arms and began tugging. "She won't budge!" They were visibly sweating. They braced themselves and pulled

together. Her hold loosened. Elena and Jody helped to pin her arms down.

"Should I sit on her head?" asked Jody.

"Don't be dumb, just hold her arm," said Elena, her mouth half-hidden by a black twist of hair.

Victoria's struggles weakened, trailing into tears and incoherent babblings.

I'm drowning. Fighting to surface. Slowly. Too slowly rising. Finally, I break through. I can breathe.

I lie safe, my head in Michael's lap, his arms around me. But so drained I can't lift an eyelid. I'm happy, surrounded by his unique, clean almost metallic smell, his fingers sketching a pattern on my arm.

Faint footsteps.

"Is she asleep?" Elena.

"Looks like it."

"She seems at peace . . . now."

The high priestess eyes were closed. She hadn't seen what she should have. She'd never doubted Elena. Victoria slid off the bed and stood in front of the mirror. "Look at me" she shouted. The high priestess opened her eyes slowly. They seemed tremulous, unsure. She began to expand, sink out of her rigid position till she was less a card and more an impressionistic print. A print of doubt.

The dreams began. She'd always had strange dreams,

but these were different. Dominated by inverted churches and desecrations of the host. Night after night the Holy Wafer bled under her feet.

The dreams. Sarah. She was afraid. She took her mind off the psychic except for innocuous things like palmistry and astrology, concentrating instead on meditation. She read Watts, Laing, Gibran, and some of the Bhagavad Gita, and, to be on the safe side, she started to go to mass again on Sunday.

She found she could no longer model. Her passion for clothes faded.

The image now was unpainted, dressed in battered jeans and eight strands of beads. The hair hung long and uncurled.

"You can get away with it." Elena remarked. "Not that you used to be able to. But now it's good. Less brittle."

"It's great to be open and natural. I got tired of presenting a false face to the world."

Elena, who'd never been seen without eyemakup since she'd turned fourteen, shook her head. "It's good for you. Not me. You're caught up on a back-to-nature trip. I'm dying to get away from nature and into a real city." Victoria nearly had her first fight with her then. Elena was so blind to anything except her own pleasure. Instead, she started talking about something else.

"I'm starting at Mount Royal in January."

At Mount Royal she got involved with a group that hung out at Borderline, the transcendental meditation house. They were good people--into fasting and the seeking of the spiritual, though with two of them she couldn't tell if they'd reached satori or taken one too many acid trips.

At first, no drugs. But she got tired of sitting and watching others get stoned. She wanted to share. To be closer to her new friends. Oh, she was still careful. She never got more than a bit high. But, once, while about fifteen of them were sitting around doing weed, she felt herself tense instead of relax.

Sarah's about. I can't understand why. I'm not stoned yet. I thought I had banished her forever. I recite my mantra. The shaking doesn't stop. I begin the Hail Mary. The edge of my consciousness darkens. "Michael!" My cry brings him to me, over the miles. He saves me.

At home, there's a note pinned to my pillow. Michael had phoned and wanted me to call him back. He heard the call and sensed the struggle.

"I was with you, could you feel it?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes."

"We seem to have something special."

"I always knew . . ."

Maybe, she was too eager. She stopped going out

with all the other men after her. She lived for his letters, phone calls and visits. She was surrounded by the new group but, unavailable sexually, she was isolated in it.

Except when Michael came down, she didn't see much of her old friends. Jody was busy with Marxist study groups and a leftie paper. Elena seemed to change after David left for Toronto. She went on alternating bouts of obliterating herself in books--she said she wanted to go to grad school--and obliterating herself in socializing. Rumour had it she was sleeping around. Victoria didn't want to believe the rumour but after what Michael told her of what he and Elena's real relationship was, of how she would come to make love to him with the smell of another man still on her, she believed it. Fortunately, he'd gotten over his infatuation for her.

So, Victoria avoided Elena. When she did see her she ended up feeling resentful. Elena obviously looked down on her friends. Besides, she sensed another, darker element.

Victoria found herself staring again at the reflection. Herself. Pale--her eyes too prominent, almost feverish--but still herself. Now. What to do? Was Sarah gone? And the new dreams. The setting varied but they all involved her gradually being surrounded, engulfed and drowned in a flood of green slime. She went on finding

herself in places without knowing how she got there. And what was she to do? Go to see Elena's psychiatrist as she'd suggested? What could he know or understand? If only Michael came down to see her more often. Even if he wrote more. It was exam time, of course, but . . .

She stretched out on the bed exhausted. Her head began to spin. Perhaps in the morning . . .

The doorbell rang. She dragged herself off the bed, pulled on her burlap caftan, opened the door to find Elena, her face tired and bare.

She sat on the floor and immediately lit a cigarette. "You're getting more beautiful all the time, Victoria." There was no malice in her gaze.

"My hair has grown . . . You look . . . different."

"I'm fucking exhausted."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Anyway, I brought the tarot; I wanted them read and, of course, I couldn't . . . I never see you anymore."

"I've been busy. The newspaper at the college and all."

"Jody's pregnant."

"God . . . no . . . for sure?"

"The dummy went off the pill."

The room was saturated with bad vibrations. She couldn't break the silence. Elena stubbed her cigarette and took out the cards. "She's going to the coast. Or maybe there's still time to do something. If she will.

You should phone her. She needs all the friends she can get."

"Of course. I'll phone tonight."

"She'll be O.K. I think. George is heading for the hills, of course." Elena's heavy lids wearily sank even lower over the bottle-green irises. She passed Victoria the cards.

"Oh, before I begin there's something I have to give you." She took an envelope from her purse. "I was in Edmonton this weekend. Michael gave me this for you."

My dearest Sybil,

I'm sorry I haven't written. I feel things aren't going well for you. Am I wrong? Is it the shadow of Sarah making you restless? Remember I'm with you.

Elena tells me you haven't seen her much. Be kind to her. She's beautiful. I'll write a proper letter at the end of the week.

love,

Michael.

Elena sat, waiting, unconcerned, on the rug. Searching her face for signs of Michael, Victoria found her unusually calm. Her normal state, whether happy or sad, tended closer to hysteria.

"Come on, Vi," she ordered with a snake-like turn of her neck. Victoria shuffled the cards automatically, unable to wrench her attention from the physical details of her face: her long neck, her proud, fine-boned features, her eyes.

Her voice was monotone as she interpreted the cards

"Not so good;" she kept interjecting. "Not so good."

But Victoria really didn't listen. She just looked at the cards and they confirmed her suspicions. The Tower--gross deception. The Three of Swords--swords thrust through a heart, the Ten of Swords--a woman alone in bed crying.

I look up into her eyes. Hooded-falcon eyes. Green-slime eyes. Sarah eyes.

"Bitch. Lying bitch," Victoria threw herself upon her, wrapping her hands around the long, white neck. There was no struggle. The flesh seemed to give way beneath her hands. The face flushed purple. Those eyes closed.

Then, she let go. She lay beside her, tears flowing silently. Still panting, Elena bent over her. "It's O.K. It's O.K." At first her kisses were faint, like flies that land for just one moment on the skin, but as Victoria lay without moving, closed to her, they fell harder, faster so that her lips touched every inch of the white skeletal face. As if rubbing it out.

THE FRUIT FALLS CLOSE TO THE TREE

"You've got pimples on your back."

He lifted his head from his pillow, a political science text. A long-legged girl in pale blue shorts blocked the sun. "Am I still asleep and dreaming or . . ."

"You're awake. Relatively awake. There's always the possibility that our entire lives are fragments of someone's dream. Or nightmare." She dropped to her knees. She had thick, chin-length brown hair and long-lashed, golden-brown eyes. Her skin was transluscent and her cheekbones high. "But one can get hung up thinking about it, so its better not to."

He rolled over on his back, sat up and faced her. "Can I ask you who you are? Or do you always swoop down on people to point out their infirmities?"

"Sure, I walk up and down the street, searching for victims. I only choose those who need victimization though." She was probably angry with him for not recognizing her. He tried to remember where he had seen those legs.

"No need to rack your brains. My name is Victoria Chariwnys."

"And what can I do for you Victoria?" He had

heard the name before but he couldn't fasten it and the legs to any time or place in his past.

She stood up. "Nothing. Nothing at all. I happened to notice the pimples on your back, that's all. You can't deny they're there, can you? No. Anyway, I'm here to see Graziella."

"You're a friend of hers?" She didn't look like she was.

"Sort of. I'm here to get one of Elena's books that she's got and I need." So that was where he had seen her before. She was crossing the lawn in long, graceful strides.

"Wait." She stopped but didn't turn. "Maybe, I can interest you in some of my books."

He awoke when the first drops from the sprinkler touched him. "Do you always sleep instead of studying?" Diana stood laughing, her long blond hair in pigtails and her white bikini emphazing her brown thighs. Such soft, yielding thighs.

"It's the heat."

"If you insist on going to summer school."

"I can hardly take a full load next year. Being president and all. I hate to waste time."

"Anyway, you're going to waste a bit now. We're going swimming."

He started walking with her towards her red

Mustang, which, as usual, was two feet from the curb, to speed up the game. "I'm sorry. I'm too busy."

"Oh, Gianni . . ." she stood still. Her full breasts strained against her too small bikini.

"I'm expecting someone. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we can go."

"You're still coming to dinner Friday?"

"Naturally."

"Remember it's black tie . . . Jane said you wouldn't come. She said you'd been going to all the Liberal rallies with some dumb model and . . ."

"I said I'll come and I'll come."

"Oh, I knew you would. I explained to her you hadn't taken me because of daddy being such a noted Conservative . . ."

He silenced her by kissing her left breast. Pleased, she squealed and glanced up and down the empty street. "I hope no one saw . . . Gianni, if I didn't know how you can be a gentleman, I'd wonder . . ."

"I was overcome." He had been, by her babbling.

"It has been a long time, but that's your fault." Her room was pink and flowered, like a child's, and when she was nude, she seemed an interloper. Had his touch made her so? No, childish as she could be, she had never been child-like. Not like Victoria.

But Victoria turned from him, removing his hands. "Please, Giovannni, don't. Don't, please. Not yet."

He had used all his usual tricks: chocolates, roses, a book of sentimental poems, his suffering, loner-in-search-of-love pose. But nothing worked. He had never beseiged a girl so intensely or for so long. She remained out of his grasp.

"Pasta again?"

Instead of answering, his mother pushed the plate closer to him. Her eyes were vague and watery behind her glasses; her usually rigid coil of braids loosely pinned. "Have you been crying?"

"Shuush . . . He'll hear you."

"He's been drinking again? . . . Why don't you ever stand up to him?"

She wiped her hands on the black apron stretched over her ample stomach. "He's my husband. What am I supposed to do? He'd tell me to stick to my kitchen and maybe I should."

The spaghetti sauce was heavy and greasy. He pushed the plate away, only to have it pushed back by his newly-arrived father. "Eat!"

Anger coiled itself around his stomach. "I'll fix you some eggs." His mother tried to smile at him.

"You'll what?" His father poured himself a tumblerful of homemade wine from the jug he had brought up from the basement and drank it in a gulp. "He eats what he's given. He's not paying for it. Lazy bastard."

He shoved the clots of pasta through his purple-stained lips. "Once, he used to work in the summer. Now what does he do? Laze around, studying, studying." More wine. More pasta. His heaving yellow-brown cheeks nearly swallowing his eyes. "I'm waiting to see what all these books will do. I never went past Grade 6 but I did well. Came to a new country and built a future out of my own sweat. I never expected anyone to give me anything, not after I was twelve years old. Look at you--twenty-one and I have to give you money to go to the picture show. Studiare fa la testa piena e la tasca vuota. As my father used to say. Capisci? You understand?"

"Studying fills the head and empties the pockets. I always understand what you say, it's just the logic behind it I don't get."

His father bit into an apple and spat out the skin. "You don't understand because you have grasshoppers in your head. Because all your studying hasn't taught you a goddamn thing. That's why you don't understand."

"Ah, Domenico, don't be so angry. Nowadays . . ."

"Nowadays nothing. Always he wants more. He has to dress like a prince. He has to have his own car. But that would be nothing, nothing, if he appreciated anything."

"Of course, he appreciates what we do."

"No. He gives me no respect--not like I gave my father. None. He's ashamed of us."

His mother's hands were shaking as she hit an egg against the counter and emptied its contents into a bowl. He had to calm her. "These are different times. People express affection and respect in different ways."

"Different times, bullshit. Non lasciare la strada . . ."

"When will you cut the proverbs, father. They don't really mean anything. You can find one to support anything."

His father threw up his fat, rough hands. "Don't go acting like the king of the shit pile, thinking you know it all. You're a ass and a idiot."

"Domenico . . ."

"Forget the eggs." He pushed himself away from the table and went to lie on the living room floor. Pretending to read the paper he let their voices fade. He'd heard the argument so many times. His mother gave way on anything concerning herself and nothing concerning her son. The cool, smooth floor made him think of Victoria's hands. She was so self-sufficiently beautiful. The expression in his fraternity brothers' eyes when they walked into that party last Saturday. He'd scored all sorts of points that evening. Victoria, his grey turtleneck, and the way he'd put down Winston, who'd been, as usual, bitching about the Student's Union budget and overflowing with suggestions of how it should be handled.

"And where is Graziella today? Out with that

schifoso?" His father's voice splintered his consciousness.

"No, she isn't with him. She's at Elena's for supper."

"That polentona." A spitting sound. "Her and her family, snot-nosed, cat-eaters all of them. Still, better them than that bastard Joe. And don't tell me about Graziella's virtues. La paglia vicino la fiamma prende fuoco. Straw near the flame catches fire.

"Yes?" Victoria's voice was detached.

"I just wanted to talk to you."

"You sound a bit unsettled."

"My father's in a rage at Graziella being out again."

"Nothing unusual in that though."

"Maybe he's right. She's so young and I don't trust him much."

"Ho, Ho. The enraged brother. You're worried about the family honor?"

"No. About her."

"I bet."

"Victoria--Fuck off."

He'd tried to be honest with her, uncovering himself in a way he rarely did. The bitch. What did she know? She'd sprung full mascaraed from her plastic, sanitized, chrome-plated world. He had been molded slowly from the never-ending heat and dust, the sharp rocks that

cut his feet and the hunger gnawing at his stomach. Ten years. Ten since he'd left his birthplace, but the image of the hill town, suspended between the merciless sun and the barren land, remained etched in his entrails. What could she understand? With her little jokes about the Mafia and honor.

"There was no need to get so upset." Her voice was as cool as ever.

"If you called me, expecting me to be all grateful and apologetic. Forget it."

"Actually, I wondered if you wanted to come over."

"I'm working on an essay."

"My parents are out for the evening."

"It has to be in by Wednesday."

"Listen--I'm offering you a lay--take it or leave it."

He had taken it. Her. She'd lain silent and still beneath him. She'd been his--for a few moments.

"Come in. Come in." Karl responded to the invitation willingly. He looked no older than he had in high school, still all untamed hair and angular thinness, though this time the thinness was encased in unusual magenta jeans and matching magenta and yellow polka-dot shirt. "You never change, Karl."

"Neither do you, old boy. Neither do you. Still wearing black, I see, still looking like the undertaker."

He was stung though Karl had said it a hundred times. Dianna has told him black was always a good bet--dignified, elegant.

"Magenta isn't really my bag."

"You don't like it?" Karl curled up, his long legs hanging over the side of the faded purple sofa.

Giovanni was about to frame a polite answer when he remembered he was talking to Karl and with him he didn't have to be polite. "I find it revolting."

Without explaining further Karl disentangled himself from the sofa.

"How about swimming?"

"Victoria's coming over."

"Last time I came it was Joan. And I saw you at Color Night with a blonde."

"Dianna."

"I thought you were doing well by her."

"I do well by everybody. She tires me."

"Victoria . . . Not Elena's friend?"

"Yes. You must know her."

"Sure. Tall, crazy chick. Overly enthusiastic but a great bod." Karl illustrated with his pipe. "Last time I saw her she was wearing a black bikini. Any chance of her wearing it tonight? I'm all in favor of flesh."

Flesh. Not the word for Victoria. Her narrow wrists, her lean, hard thighs (like those of a young boy). When he sank into her, her sharp hipbones cut into him.

"She has a blue and white polka-dot one now."

Karl laughed. "It figures. She doesn't seem your type though."

"Why not?"

"Too much of a picture."

"A picture?"

"A mannequin. All look, no touch."

He had touched her. Determined to seem as cool as she, he'd wasted no time on the usual phrases or caresses. But the possession did not come as easily as he expected it to. She began shivering, her muscles tightened against him. She was closed to him. It was only when with force and anger he broke into her that he realized it was her first time. A moment of exultation. All her coolness had been a front. She had given herself to him in a profound way. But, when he asked why she hadn't told him, kissing her cheek affectionately and rubbing a drop of bloodied sperm between his two fingers, as if to absorb them through his skin, she laughed.

"You Sicilians are still hung-up on such physical trivia aren't you?"

"Do you know her very well?" Gianni did not look at Karl, afraid he would find himself confessing.

"No. I only know Elena."

"Giovanni," his mother shuffled in slowly. "I brought you and Karl some wine."

"Thank you, mother." Without answering, she shuffled out, dragging her heavy legs as if they were not a part of her.

Karl picked up his glass, held it to his nose and took a cautious sip. "Aah! As vile as ever!"

"Elena's a picture too."

"No, but . . ."

"There is some similarity between the two." Gianni interrupted, excited. "Some tie. Some--"

"Actually, I'd rather not talk about it." Karl was industriously cleaning and refilling his pipe. His face was faintly flushed. Unflappable, know-it-all Karl. Just mention Elena and you had him.

"But you were going to say something about Elena before."

"Nothing. Nothing. You shouldn't pay attention to anything I say about her. I don't really know her at all." His eyes, behind his glasses, were beagle-like.

"Karl--she's just a broad. After the way she's treated you, you shouldn't give a fuck about her."

But the vulnerable expression was gone, replaced with his habitual, uninvolved, impersonal one.

"I came over here to talk to you about your future."

"My future?"

"You are concerned with your future with a capital "F" aren't you? You do want to be successful. Our man on

student council. Our man in the courts. Our man in Ottawa."

"Well I . . . ."

"Sure you do. That's why you need to please while I don't. I came with some ideas on making you more marketable."

"Marketable." He supposed he should get angry but he didn't bother. He only got ahead by learning to recognize and absorb a good thing when he saw it (whether it was an idea, a position, or a woman). Most people yielded up all they had to offer in a month or a year but Karl was a veritable storehouse--he shed insights as often as cigarette butts.

"What sort of ideas?"

Karl grinned, opening a tattered black scribbler. "We could work out a partnership. I, the idea man--you, the action man."

"Who says I need an idea man?"

"You've applied for the Rhodes."

Before Gianni could ask how he knew, the doorbell rang. Victoria breezed in, lighting up the dull, dark room with her orange jeans and flowered shirt. She didn't look at him, not even a glance in his direction. "What a gorgeous day--oh, hello Karl. The sun! The heat! When Elena and I were coming over--where is she? Oh, she must be upstairs talking to your mother. Anyway, she and I finally decided on your color, Gianni." She refused a

chair and settled on the floor, wrapping her endless legs around her. "We were picking dandelions and it suddenly came to us that your color is yellow." Her eyes finally met his.

"Yellow? Are you questioning my courage?"

She shook her head, her thick hair swinging slowly from side to side. "Nooo. Don't be so mundane. Yellow is the most aggressive of colors. The most kinetic." She turned to Elena who had just entered. "He thinks yellow means cowardice."

"Oh. It doesn't." He watched her sink into an armchair, pulling her short, white skirt towards her knees. He had known her even longer than he'd known Karl. She'd lived up the block from him since Junior High and their families, as the only two Italian families in the neighborhood exchanged regular visits, though they were never really friends. He'd even taken her to a high school dance once--on her request. But, despite all the years, she was a stranger to him. He had gone to her though, after his fight with Victoria.

Stopping on a casual drive around the city to watch the sunset behind Glenmore Reservoir he let his hand drop on Victoria's thigh.

She took it off. "Don't be adolescent."

"You're the one who's being childish. It's been a week now."

They ended up yelling at each other. Both dramatically claiming that it was useless and they never wanted the other again. But after he let her off at her house, through his anger (tight-assed bitch) he felt the conviction that he couldn't let her go just yet. He must be remembered as more than the clumsy first one. He had to leave his imprint on her memory of pleasure so he'd become the yardstick she would measure others by. He needed time. Time to bring her to that point where all the hardness unfurled into a flow of ecstacy. Then, would be time enough to leave her.

So, he went to Elena. It was late. She'd been obviously getting ready for bed. She stood at the door looking confused, clutching a pink, drifty dressing gown. They sat in the kitchen.

"Victoria doesn't want to see me again."

"No. She was upset."

"I guess I was gauche."

"Have patience with her. You're the first she's really gone out with."

"That's hard to believe."

"She's always been frightened."

"Of what?"

Elena looked at him intently. "Does she matter to you?"

"A lot . . . I've never met anyone like her."

"I'll talk to her."

And she had. He didn't know what she said but when he met Victoria in The Havana she greeted him by kissing him on the mouth, in front of a cafe full of people.

Now she sat close to Karl intrepidly discussing Games People Play. She'd found some dingy, plastic flowers stuck in a vase in a corner and was threading them through her hair. "Sir Launcelot sans Guenivere. That's Gianni's game." She turned her head to better observe Giovanni's reaction. A faded blue rose fell out of her hair bopping her on the nose.

"Perfect!" Karl waved his pipe in joy. "Sir Gianni du Lac."

"I'm not in the least bit Sir Launceloty."

"Underneath, of course." Victoria continued, rewinding the blue flower in her hair. "Underneath he's Morfred, the outcast, scheming for the throne."

"If I play the Launcelot game, which I don't admit, mind you, what do the rest of you play?" He tried to catch Victoria's eye but she resisted him, concentrating on her long, bejewelled fingers. "What do you play Victoria?"

"I play the . . ."

"Cold sophisticate?" Karl volunteered.

"Yes, the cold sophisticate." She looked up from her hands but still avoided his eyes. "The face. Etc.

Etc."

Karl's mouth twisted sardonically. "How does it feel to have people looking at you all the time?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not as hung up on it as Gianni is on his though." She adjusted the fake flowers in her hair.

"I protest."

"You are hung up." Her eyes flickered over him coldly.

"I'm always honest with myself . . ."

"What about Karl? He's always playing a game."

"True." Karl's smile was pained. "Educator of the world. That's my bag. Village sage trying to guide the city. But at least I recognize my game. That's something."

"And Elena?"

She hadn't said a word since she'd come in. Giovanni suddenly realized that she was embarrassed by Karl's presence. It served her right. She'd been the most faithful, loving of girlfriends, right up to the day she'd met David. She'd changed masters in the flick of an eyelid. And it wasn't as if David had any tremendous charm of status. He was a huge furry type man who was noted for driving his Volkswagon through fences and being opposed to everything. As far as anyone could tell, you never knew if he meant what he said or if he was making fun of you.

"What do you think Elena's game is?" Giovanni

turned to Karl.

Elena's lids contracted to expose fully, for a second, her bottomless eyes. She seemed to shrink further into the armchair. "I know what he's going to say. He's going to say I'm a 'multi-colored, marble statue'."

Karl's mouth mirrored his discomfort. "That pertains to something different . . . I wish I knew which game you do play; I've thought about it but I don't know."

"I don't know either." Victoria interjected. "She's sort of out of everything and she doesn't try to get in. It makes me so angry sometimes." But her eyes were gentle, as they rested on Elena.

"Alienated. That's me." Elena laughed, tossing back her head and displaying her long, white throat. Maybe, I wouldn't feel so out of place if I'd finished growing up in Venice."

"I've heard it smells." Victoria was arranging the flowers into pentangles.

"What would a girl like you do in Italy? They don't have the freedom you have here, you know."

"Don't be silly. Customs in Venice aren't that different from here. Of course--in the South--they're still not quite civilized."

His father was right. Damn her and her snot-nosed family with their embroidered linen tablecloths, intricate chandeliers, and antique, painted fans. The tones of their voices, their movements impressed on you over and over how

educated they were, how superior. They--people like them--were at the root of why he'd never be sorry he left. As a child, their poverty, their suppers of onions and bread were something he accepted. But he remembered how his fist would tighten so the nails cut into his palm each time Don Gesualdo, the town lawyer, would deign to stop for a few minutes in front of their hut. His mother would be so happy, so honored. Or if Signora Santa, the town schoolteacher brought a few of her children's castoffs for them. His mother's effusive thanks drove him out into the streets to throw rocks.

At least here the paternalism was more veiled. Dianna's Cadillac-driving, mink-wearing parents really thought they were being kind when they talked of how good it was to see a boy from his people doing so well. As did the scholarship people with their comments on the tremendous obstacles he'd overcome.

"I'll probably go next summer. I'm hoping to find some sort of job." Elena was saying.

"I never want to live there."

"You can't deny your roots."

"No." He saw his hill town, stark and beautiful. "I know where I'm from. I carry it inside. I don't ever intend to deny that" or my parents, he could have added, but he saw that they understood what he implied. "But I couldn't really go back--except as a tourist."

Victoria leaned over, took one of his hands and

kissed it gently on the palm. "True blue."

Happy, he slid his arm around her and found himself automatically testing to see if, as the soft fullness billowing her blouse promised, she was not wearing a bra. He was discovering his suspicions were correct when she stiffened and moved away. He touched her back but she busied herself rearranging the flowers in three piles. Again, she was beyond his reach. It was like a chess game. She stretched, her blouse outlining her erect nipples. Her droopy breasts flowed and swelled at him.

What was wrong? Why did she continue to resist him?

Victoria lifted her hand to push back her hair. Her large, topaz ring, that Elena had brought from Venice, glinted in the light, matching her eyes.

Frigid. But there was so much awareness of her body in her movement. She turned to address him, a wave of her exotic, spicy perfume flowing over him. As she spoke, her left hand, unconsciously, stroked the exposed skin at the base of her neck while her right moved restlessly over her thigh.

Elena leaned over to whisper something in Victoria's ear. Victoria clapped her hands, laughing suddenly, then lightly touched Elena's hand. The pieces of the kaleidoscope fell into a readable pattern. His head throbbed and a bitter taste filled his mouth.

He didn't give up. They had some good times in the next few weeks swimming, going to movies, talking for hours over coffee in The Havana. And whenever he got the chance, he attacked her body with all the skills his reading and experience had given him. He would work on her erogenous zones for hours. She would sweat and sigh and rotate her hips up against him, but she never quite got there.

Then, he began to grow tired of it all. He had expended enough energy. It wasn't any lack of his. Any woman . . . It was she; she was unconquerable.

"We remind you of what?" Victoria's voice rose to a screech. The evening was so warm it physically caressed their separate bodies. "But you're teasing me, of course. Not that it's very funny. Aren't you?" She smiled at him but he could not respond. "I'm afraid you're not." Her eyes searched his face. "You've gone mad." After waiting for a denial and not receiving one, she glided over to the bush dividing his yard from the next and began tearing off and shredding the leaves. Her anger hardened the gentle air into a thousand glass splinters.

"Victoria--" His words were submerged beneath the roar of a gun-metal, grey Volkswagon hurtling down the street. All of a sudden its four tires froze and the little car skidded sideways to a halt. Instead of crashing, the Volkswagon, like a giant dung beetle, humped one tire

after the other over the rounded curb that bordered Gianni's boulevard, and, with a first gear snort, jumped up onto the grass. The car skimmed over the sidewalk and came to a stop between him and Victoria. David's head popped out of one door, Elena's out of the other.

"Hello peoples. Ready for the roner weist?"

Giovanni stared at the Volks. The bumper was gone and the rear fenders were chopped off. For some unexplained reason, perhaps a hunting accident, there were a series of bullet holes across the top of the car and a wide whallop where perhaps a shot-gun had raked across the bonnet.

"Get that car off my lawn. Do you always drive on the lawn?"

"Doesn't hurt the lawn any." David explained patiently. "And if you got in, instead of gawking, we'd be gone."

David drove the way the Volks suggested he drove, hunched over the wheel, his elbows out, changing position only to yell obscenities at people who drove at the speed limit or gulp from the bottle of beer Elena was holding. Giovanni, in the back seat, touched Victoria's arm but she stared stonily through the window. The car hurtled through the night, passing and cutting in front of cars. They swerved to avoid a pedestrian and lurched around a corner. Victoria was thrown against him. Her body was hard and rigid and she righted herself as soon as she could.

His attention, and stomach, was wrenched away as they missed a left-turning car by inches.

Before his body had time to register his fear and be violently ill, the car squealed to a stop in front of a liquor store, which Elena and David promptly headed for. "That was quite a car ride."

"I wasn't frightened." Victoria's voice was distant but her face was besmattered with tears. Giovanni took her hand. She wrenched it away. "Look, Giovanni . . . I don't want to see you ever again. Ever. I've had it." She wiped her face with a Kleenex. Her mascara had smeared to form dark patches on her cheeks. "You have as much sensitivity as a bull moose."

David threw two cases of beer through the window. Giovanni was certain that the bottles would be smashed in the crates but his intuition proved wrong. They landed safely on the backseat, missing him by a few inches. Show-off. When he and Elena got into the car, laughing, Victoria asked to be taken home.

David obeyed Victoria's command without even turning his head. Silence replaced laughter in the front seats and Elena kept turning around to shoot Giovanni long, accusing looks. When they arrived, with the customary screech, Victoria climbed out without a word to anyone. "Wait for me." Elena followed her.

They stood, Elena holding Victoria's hand, two slight figures disrupting the darkness of the lawn. Then,

Elena kissed Victoria's cheek and returned to the car.

David drove even faster. The lights along the main road merged into one, long, blurred line. The Volks slowed suddenly, almost suddenly, and shot into an alley full of potholes. After Giovanni and more particularly, his stomach was thoroughly bounced and rattled about, the car stopped by his backyard.

They unloaded him with polite goodbyes. He thought, but wasn't sure, that he heard Elena whisper "merda." He very slowly wandered through the cabbage and potato plants of his mother's garden. Victoria and her friends could go to hell. They all thought they were better than him, all of them. But he'd show them--eventually. He'd phone Dianna in the morning. Dianna of the soft thighs. And. No--he wouldn't phone her. As his father said, a new broom swept best. He needed a change. Going through his mental files of women he had met, he remembered a tall, thin girl with quiet blue eyes. Less striking than Victoria--they had made an impressive couple--but this one, this one would be softer, more malleable. Jose, Victoria's younger sister. Chuckling, trying to ignore his nausea, he went into the house.

WINTER

Elena didn't want to go to the party. She sat in front of her mirror for hours, listening to Billy Holiday, applying different shades of lipstick and eyeshadow, carefully erasing and redrawing complex black lines around her eyes, brushing and repinning her hair. But these rituals, usually so soothing, served only to remind her of the times she had performed them in preparation for David. She sprayed her arms, neck and hair with the dark, rich perfume he had given her and pushed herself away from the safety of her reflection.

Standing in the deserted hallway, littered with boots and coats that had fallen from hangers, she realized she'd arrived too late. The party had already evolved to the stage where most of the guests were dancing, or rather moving under the all-magical strobe light, not to the desperate rhythm Janis Joplin defiantly belted from the stereo, but to their own smaller, more petty rhythms. Still, Elena saw one or two faces suddenly spotlighted by the flashes of light that shared Joplin's confusion. "Take another little bit of my heart now baby." Her confusion.

Elena unwrapped her outer layer of clothes slowly and clumsily, conscious of the absence of David's helping

hand. From the living room, in the spaces of light, several extended arms moved in a way that could be interpreted as waves. As best she could, laden as she was with her sweater, coat, scarf, hat and boots, she waved back, feeling as helpless as before. Beside her, instead of support and energy, there was empty space.

"Elena!" The hostess had materialized, looking very hostessy with her welcoming smiles, divided attention, and silver jumpsuit. "I'm so glad you came. I was afraid you'd forgotten."

"No."

"Better late than never. Let me take your stuff." The hostess swept away Elena's things and stuffed them into the overfull closet. "What a lovely dress. Red velvet suits you."

"Thank you . . . I . . ."

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

"Oh well, come and join the fun. Why didn't you bring David. He's such a riot."

The snow was deep and cold. His car a mere dot in the whiteness. "David shaved his beard and went to the consequent job in Toronto."

"Oh. Too bad. He was so much fun. Do you remember when he rode that little motorbike through the house? I thought I'd die laughing. I hadn't heard he'd left." She seemed almost resentful. "Anyway, there are

hundreds of people here you know. The food and drinks are in the kitchen and--oh, Bob--do come here." She motioned, the silver ornaments in her hair bobbing dangerously. "Do you know Bob, Elena? He's such a sweet guy."

"He's in medieval history with me."

"Ah, at last." She took one of Bob's limp hands (he had crossed the room very slowly) and wrapped it around Elena's. "Bob, I want you to meet Elena. She's a very sweet girl." She bounced off, ornaments tinkling.

Bob dropped Elena's hand, rubbing his palm on his jeaned leg. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

A class of ten and he asked her if he knew her from somewhere. "History 402."

"Oh, yeah."

"Have you done your paper yet?"

"Nah . . . I've started looking at books though. Draag."

"The topics aren't very stimulating. I wanted to do something on Eleanor of Aquitaine. I'm rather hung up on her. But Jones wouldn't hear of it."

Bob's rather blank, watery eyes fixed on her for a moment as if he'd never heard of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and then wandered over her shoulder to fix on the mass of dancing shapes.

"Hi, you two!" A girl, noted for being consistently cheerful, pushed past them, bundling on a coat with one arm and dragging her lethargic boyfriend with the other.

"We're going for more booze. Want any?" Before they could reply, she was out of the door and into the snowdrifts separating the house from the cars. Each crackling step they took broke through the hardened top crust, glittering under the porch light, so they sank thigh deep into the soft, under snow.

"It could take them forever."

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "Jackie'll never change."

"No . . ."

Someone in the living room, having jumped presumably for some inner joy, slipped and fell with a loud smack.

Elena tried again, disgusted at herself as she did so that she tried at all.

"What do you think of Jones?"

"Draag. A bore. Thinks he's really something too."

"Yeah . . ."

Had she forgotten how to talk to anyone but David? Even her letters to Michael were mere dribbles of trivia now. At first, the link between them had been hard and clean and impersonal. He wanted nothing from her, he was so involved in his poetry, his search for "truth." She went to him because the skill of his caresses released in her an intensity of pleasure no one else could. Her

body--rounded, pink and fleshy, his--narrow-shouldered, hunched--the straight angular lines dissecting her curves. They existed together only on his small, single bed. But, lately, since she unthinkingly told him about her ten year struggle for sanity, he wanted, insisted on her opening her mind to him. "I want to know. Let me see." Cutting through her resistance by furtively dropping an acid dosed sugar cube into her coffee.

Better not to think of that. David was really the only one and he was gone. "I can't take it anymore," he'd said. Had they really talked? Had he ever listened? He didn't listen when she asked him not to go. "You expect me to give and give and give. I'm tired," had been his only answer.

Yet, he had understood, if only through the framework of their rituals. "I'm cold" had always been the signal for him to take her in his arms.

"I'm cold."

Bob blinked back in surprise. He had been enumerating Jones' defects. "It's rather chilly here; it's warmer in the bedrooms."

In spite of the familiarity of the faces in the first bedroom she wouldn't go in, sensing that newcomers would be intruding, but stood at the door. A group of about eight sat on the floor in a circle, passing the remains of a joint. They inhaled, their heads sank into

their bodies, they exhaled, they fumbled slowly for the dying joint again. Through the smoky haze, hair flowed, twisted, knotted itself with more hair. Blue jean and khaki touched and merged.

"Emeralds and . . ." Jody's pale, yellow hair glinted in the candlelight as she spoke, "roses."

The earth-coloured boy beside her stroked his rough, stained clothes as if they were velvet. "Roses." He laughed.

Victoria, splendid in a gold and purple embroidered afghan stabbed the end of the roach and looked up at Elena. "Oh, you're here too." She looked down at the plastic bag, half-filled with the brown leaves. "I'm the chief joint roller. But I'm not very good. Riot, isn't it? I'm better than the rest though. Especially her." She waved a beringed hand at Jody who, at the sound of her name, pulled herself up, caught sight of Elena and greeted her by covering her face with her hands and peeking through them, laughing soundlessly.

"She's flying high, super high on this new type of acid I . . ."

"So I notice."

Victoria shrugged her shoulders and began packing the violet-tinted cigarette paper.

"Well, see you, Victoria."

"Oh," her eyes focused again on Elena and then on Bob. "Um, I want to talk to you. But later, Elena, O.K.?"

"Sure. Later."

When Bob opened the door of the second bedroom, they were greeted with shrieks and glimpses of bare buttocks.

"Eeek!"

"What is it?"

"Someone's coming."

Lying in the back seat of the Volks, the doors open, surrounded by fields of melting snow and mud. Pale spring sun glinting on their bodies. David had shaken his head impatiently. "We're alone." The scent of new life erupting through the mud and snow to intoxicate and, somehow, frighten her. "Miles from civilization." She clung to him.

The third room was brightly lit and full of people wearing "I'm discussing a world shaking issue" expressions. She obeyed Bob's nudges, going in and sitting on the only free spot on the bed while Bob started to follow--then muttered something about getting something to drink and disappeared.

Relieved, Elena sat looking at her fingernails, hoping no one else would be thrust on her, catching only odd phrases like "group therapy," "atomization of the individual" and "irrational impulses." Slowly, the familiarity of the discussion soothed her, giving her a sense of security. David had always considered all such

discussions in bad taste. The time she had got into the big argument on the Bible with the blond pipsqueak--it must have been one of the first parties they had gone to together, the first large party, the entire house had been jammed full, he had been disgusted, insisting they leave. "Never grant a waterass an initial premise. It's useless."

The snow-covered branches of the trees, a lace veil for the darkness. Useless. Useless. Staring at the sky, in silence while he talked. Useless. Now she believed it was too.

Karl certainly didn't. He sat opposite her, waving his pipe to emphasize his points, raising his voice in excitement, stroking the long, brown hair of his date with his free hand.

He had gentle hands.

The sun so hot it threatened to dissolve everything into wild-flower scented oils. Their eyes meeting in knowledge as his voice droned on and on at his friends. His hand stroking her hair.

She wondered about him and the girl. He was happy with her, whoever she was. He hadn't been so happy the last time they'd been together. Really together.

His expressive face froze into stone as she told

him about David. She leaned forward. Touched his lips, and the tears ran silently down his frozen face.

"You can face anything if you have enough inner strength. That's the trouble though. People don't. They're boosted up by drugs or . . ." It was Karl's girl talking. Karl nodding enthusiastically in agreement. Elena controlled the impulse to scratch the self-righteousness out of that pink-cheeked face, to sink her nails until the blood spurted, by leaving. As she stumbled over the feet that had placed themselves between her and the door, she could feel Karl watching her with cool disinterest, which made her even angrier.

She picked her way over the people who had settled in the hallway, passing the first bedroom, she noticed the circle had fallen apart. She went in and sat down between Jody and Victoria, both of whom had retreated into the far corner.

Jody, like most of the people in the room, seemed oblivious to everything but, when Elena pushed the hair off her face, she began to speak. "I'm dissolving--floating out in--every direction--long men with long, white beards--trying to grab at me--to--screech--they screech at me--they . . ." Jody suddenly dropped her head, chin to chest, her hair falling back over her face.

Victoria, who seemed no higher than her normal state, smiled tolerantly at Jody. "Poor kid."

"Any joints left?"

Victoria passed her a very thin one. "You want to turn on?"

"Obviously."

"Just checking. Anyway, there isn't enough."

"I don't need much."

"Um . . . which reminds me. I want to talk to you."

"So you said."

"Hey, take it easy with that stuff . . . Look, are you O.K.?"

The room was floating, swaying, down an oily, green canal. "Sure." She was tempted to ask Victoria why she was concerned after months of embarrassed hellos and hasty "I'm-busy-at-the-moment."

"Michael said he was worried about you. He was supposed to come tonight, but he phoned at the last minute. He asked if I'd seen you . . . I think he was stoned." A patch of spilt wine became a leak in the hulk of the swaying room. The iceberg tip of fathoms of greenness. Soon, soon, she could feel, it would come towards her, slither around her, engulf her. "Elena, look at me, not at the ground. Michael thinks a lot of you . . ."

"Whore of the world." Michael stood tall and apart in his long velvet robes.

"Whore of the world." The crowd repeated, moving

steadily towards her, their faces distended with anger. She let them take her.

"Gently" Michael ordered, "I love her"--encase her in the prepared casket, as if she were already dead.

The lid dropped silently, enclosing her in gem-studded, rainbow-hued tapestry. The colors sank through her skin, flesh, blood, to her bone marrow, coiling her essence into patterns.

Gradually, the rigid, black and white room began to reassert itself. Michael a pale blue fragment beside her.

"What do you want of me?"

"Nothing. I only want to help. Tell me what you saw." His cool hands caressed her forehead. "So easy. Just let me see."

"Elena, you keep drifting off. I asked you how you're taking the losing David scene."

"I was thinking of the last time I saw Michael."

The hostess materialized in the doorway, filling the room with silver, tingling vibrations. Her beams were greeted with grunts and streams of incoherent words. "Everything's O.K. here," Victoria said in a tone that told her that it was best if she turned her hostessing elsewhere. "Michael thinks a lot of you" she began again.

"Michael can burn in hell."

"Your head <u>is</u> in a strange space." Victoria

rearranged the folds of her afghan around her as if preparing herself for a scene in a play or film.

"Thank you very much. I'll live." Elena concentrated on dragging on the joint. Her consciousness remained firmly normal. The confused scene of arabesques, domes, cupolas, and turrets that floated on the fathoms of greased greenness hovering opaquely over the room, came from deeper in her mind than the part the drug soothed.

Victoria, still talking, moving her white, long-fingered hands,". . . you and David playing in the snow once. Making angels. Laughing. For some reason, the scene stuck with me. You seemed happy and I was happy watching you."

"We were." Happy? Had they been? Didn't matter. What was important was he was the only thing that ever calmed and clarified her mind. For, he carried the vitality of the prairie earth and sky within him. And he let that energy flow from him to her, so each time she touched him she was newly strengthened--all the terrors gone. She had begun to touch too much, his skin a magnet for her fingers until he protested "You always want more." He misunderstood when she called him David Erectus--phallic fertility god. She worshipped his cock (so large and magnificent) not for the ecstacy it brought her, for in physical fact it gave her little more than discomfort and pain, but for the life it embodied. She was empty. He filled her.

"I wish all the past could be obliterated. That no scenes would ever stick. Because it doesn't matter. Forgetting is necessary to survival. The past is the past. You must forget David. Forget."

"Shit, isn't there any more?"

"No." Victoria lost interest in Elena and began to inspect her nails, chewing off the ragged ends.

"We were friends once, weren't we? Talked to each other." About everything and everybody. Especially themselves. But she had forgotten if they had ever said anything.

Victoria didn't bother to look up from her hands. She began chanting over and over "forgetting is necessary to survival," as if it were her mantra. She would try seeing Victoria some other time, when they were both more coherent.

In the hall, a group had settled around a girl with long, black hair and a guitar and were singing bawdy songs with zest. Trying to wend her way through, she met George, who had just come out of the bathroom.

"Hi."

"How are you?" She racked her memory for a pro-Marxian anecdote or a new capitalistic outrage to talk about, but she couldn't find any. As usual, she stood in front of George, silent and dull.

"Is Jody still in there?" He pointed to the first bedroom, his elbow showing through the hole in his faded

sweater.

"Yes." She seized the chance to actually say something. "She's very stoned. Seeing men with long, white beards."

"It's always like that. I wish she wouldn't"

"Well, why don't you stop her? Help her? You want to, don't you? You love her?"

"It's her religious hangups . . ." Snatches of a ribald song weaved absurdly up and around their conversation.

"She needs more security and love. Don't desert her."

"There are no individual solutions . . ." He trailed off as he noticed Gianni enter the corridor. Gianni was in black, leading an exquisite Chinese girl by the hand. "Gotta go." George ducked into the nearest bedroom. "Damned, wishy-washy liberal."

"Hello, Gianni."

"Long time no see." He introduced the tiny girl as Tina.

"I heard David's gone."

"Yeah."

"You must be lonely." His smile was startlingly white against the darkness of the corridor and his high cheekboned face.

"I keep busy." No, she wasn't ready to play his game yet. "I manage."

"Come and see me some time." He smiled at her, then at Tina, brazenly. Elena didn't bother answering.

The kitchen was comparatively empty; a pair of lovers gazing mournfully into each other's eyes and myriads of bottles. Elena fished out a deserted-looking bottle of Pernod, poured herself a glass and, without bothering to add water, drank it down.

"What are you doing?" Karl, in the doorway, watching her.

She touched her cheek and remembered how ticklish David's beard was. "Celebrating."

"Celebrating?"

"David's leaving. An important event, don't you think? His leaving." Pouring herself another glass, though with water this time, she held it in salutation before downing it. "An end. To all sorts of things."

"I hadn't heard."

"Oh?"

"You're unhappy?" His eyes softened. His gentle eyes. Holding his face, kissing away his tears. Imprinting her love for him on his eyelids.

"You feel deserted?" His arm around her shoulder. "I am sorry. It's rather surprising. It lasted quite a while."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Two years . . . You seem to be doing all right."

A fuzzy-headed boy from her anthropology class

wandered unsteadily in, selected the fullest bottle and left.

"Mary and I are engaged."

"How nice."

He smiled proudly. "She's a neat kid. Not a romantic sort but good, levelheaded." Neat kid. Pale little bit of nothing. Calm to the point of deadness. If things were different. If she wasn't so tired, she'd show him who was the neat kid. Right on the kitchen floor.

"What did you think?"

"Well, I really can't say much. Seemed like a nice well-balanced girl." He'd said that, jokingly, of her once. She looked at him to see if he remembered. He did, but he turned away to pick up two glasses and fill them with the right amount of pernod and water.

"You'd like her if you knew her . . . We won't be getting married until I have my masters of course."

"Of course."

The hostess breezed in, as merry as ever, with two identically thin, pimply and sparsely bearded friends. "You plug in the kettle Craig. I'll get the coffee." She took out a big pack of Old Dutch Potato Chips, offered them to Karl and Elena and the two beards and, receiving "No-thank-you's" all around, disappeared out into the living room, clutching the package.

"I suppose I should be getting back. We'll have to get together soon though. I want you to get to know

Mary."

"Sure. Sounds good." Perhaps, she would learn to like Mary. The idea was depressing. Still, Mary did have a certain softness and Karl was more confident and content than she had ever seen him.

"Will you look after the coffee?" It was one of the beards. Elena nodded and turned back to Karl. She had to say something quickly, before the green darkness returned, more threateningly this time, to engulf her mind. Already, it was seeping in, creeping closer, inching its way. "Do you remember, in high school, how we'd walk and walk? You'd give the history of the Austro-Hungarian empire, of the world. And I'd hold your hand. We'd pick wildflowers in the meadow by the river and lie in the sun."

His eyes were guarded. "I remember. That was a long time ago."

"Will you see me sometimes, alone?"

He ran his fingers through his hair so it stuck out from his forehead. "What do you want?"

"Nothing." Everything. "I'm feeling rather screwed up. I need to talk."

"People change." They did, but she didn't. Was she stuck forever in this position of helplessness? "I'll phone you. I promise," he added, kissing her lightly as he left.

In the living room the strobe light had been turned off. Judy Collins' controlled laments had replaced

Joplin's raw wails of loneliness. Outside, even the snow was soiled.

ALL LIFE FROM THE SEA

Under the wind, the sea awoke to fury. The waves, secret muscles, gathered strength, then clenched to attack the shore. The grey spray and rain caressed her with a bitter sting. The sea was her lover and she was powerless before him. She tried to walk away across the sand, but her body, already alien to her, grew even heavier--a stone anchored in sand.

"I'll pray for you." Elena's words and dark, concerned eyes came to Jody as she struggled, freeing her from her obsession. It was soothing to think of those prayers for her benefit. Not that she was naive enough to believe that there was anyone or anything to answer them. No. Once, in high school, on a retreat at the Franciscan monastery in the foothills, she and Elena had walked for miles in the snow. They hadn't talked, they kept the silence solemnly. And, when they stopped, very still, to gaze at the enormous blue mountains on the horizon, she'd been suddenly flooded with the sense of almost understanding, almost seeing the spirit behind it all. Now, she searched, all senses open, for the smallest sign, the slightest flicker of something beyond the here and now, but the rocks, the sand, the sea betrayed nothing but brute force. And

that did not answer prayers. Still, it was the thought of someone thinking and caring about her, enough to ask for things in her favor.

Besides, it did no harm.

No harm . . .

George certainly wouldn't agree with that. "It's all that religious bullshit they brainwashed you with at school," he'd declare whenever she threw up or had a headache due to the pill. "They breed guilt into you."

After their first major quarrel, she'd vowed she'd let no man ever touch her again and threw the pills away, one by one, the round container after, into the river swollen from October rains. Laughter, raucous and wild, had filled the air and she had begun to cry when she realized the laughter was hers. The pavement, cold against her cheek. The hands that lifted, rough. The thronging faces, distorted. She had struggled for a moment but had been freed not from the hands but from consciousness. When the blackness cleared, it had not ended. She was no longer by the river, but in a strange car driven by a starched-white-shirt man with a flapping, fish-like mouth that kept asking her who she was. She could not make him understand that she didn't know. He let her go only when she threatened to throw herself from the car if he didn't.

"Nervous exhaustion," she'd told George. He'd

immediately suggested it was the specter of her Catholic past that had driven her to it. Perhaps he'd been right. But he'd started the fight that had touched it off--shouting and tearing up a letter from the French student she'd met and travelled with in Europe.

No harm. That had been a slip. Her mind was disintegrating in this lonely place. George was right. She wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the Church.

Having crossed the railroad tracks that bordered the sand, Jody turned her back to the sea. The steep hill before her was becoming each day more difficult to climb. She started up, the weight inside her growing until she had to stop. She stood, one-third of the way up, panting, her heart beating out of control. She used to run up hills like this without a gasp. Running, skiing, horse-back riding, she'd glorified in the pliability, responsiveness of her body. Now this ache, this pain in each movement. Still, she couldn't give up, stay closed in her room. No. She forced herself on, listening to her rasping breaths. Counting the slow steps. Then, just when she thought she'd collapse, she was at the top.

Several hundred yards ahead, in the middle of the sparkling clean, pine and glass summer houses, stood her usual place of rest, a dingy church, not much more than a shack with a steeple and a sign that read "Our Lady, Star of the Sea."

"Stop squirming Jody." Not understanding. Grown-ups towering like trees around her, cutting off any view of the altar.

A white dress and veil. "Body of Christ."

"Amen."

Learning the catechism, sitting on Uncle's black cassocked knee. "What a lucky girl you are, coming from such a good family--your uncle a Monsignor, your aunt a Mother Superior."

Years marked not only by the seasons and her growth but by the changing liturgy and the ever-increasing number of brothers and sisters. President of the Sodality of Mary. Winner of the Knights of Columbus essay contest.

"Did you ever think you had a vocation, Jody? You're a lively girl but the Church needs spirits like yours."

Jody sank into the back pew. "Thank God, for sitting." She said it aloud, conscious of her facetiousness. "And for the Church--the only place to sit between the beach and my room."

The Church.

Mother Gabriel pointing her long, bony finger and damning them all to hell. Sins of the flesh. The daily masses, the rosaries, the exhortations against men. The yearly procession with the statue of Mary. (From the cathedral to the school gymnasium, the clouds of incense

rising from the incense burner. The school president, fingers shaking, crowning the Virgin with a wreath of roses, while the girls, each in a white dress, recited a vow of chastity.)

The Church. She traced the MJ someone had carved into the back of the pew ahead of her. Ten pews on each side, no statues, a bare altar with a simple cross. "Our Lady, Star of the Sea" didn't really seem to be a church. Not like "Sacred Heart," at home. The ever-changing embroidered silks behind the altar and on the priest's back, the flashing golden chalices, the chant of the ritual counterpointed with the rich complex tones of the organ. They made the church an awesome place for so many years. Maybe in a shabby church like this one, she wouldn't have taken so long to start seeing. Seeing the empty, sagging faces attached to deadened mink and diamond-ornamented bodies. The congregation as uplifting as a lump of porridge. To look at her parents, not any different than the others, and their regulated life. An hour Sunday morning for the development of the spirit. Four hours Sunday afternoon, swimming and playing tennis, for the development of the body.

She had realized that she couldn't live their life--full of self-righteousness and conformity.

Beginning to look at her teachers, who lived even more regimented lives; each hour accounted for in an effort

to obliterate any deviation, any fragment of inner self.

She couldn't make them understand: she was Jody, not a generalization.

She wondered what the family was doing and if they were thinking of her. Probably not. If she was mentioned, it would only be as an example, a warning to the younger ones. They'd given her money--in their system, it was the only thing that could be done. Strange to think her father had been a worker once, in the coal mines of Nova Scotia. Impossible. He fit so perfectly his role of lawyer. Defender of everything as it was. Impersonation of success. And her mother, never more than the wife of a made-it lawyer. Forever, a shadow. She would have rebelled against them even if she hadn't met George.

He was the editor of the student newspaper. He didn't like her cub reporter stories, full of high school style enthusiasm. She thought his view of news was slanted and biased. They fought--loudly--over the value of his ornamenting his editorials with four-letter words. She became the butt of his staff. She was naive, childish, stupid. But George kept taking her for coffee, trying to convince her not to quit. Coffee grew to lunches and then suppers. The little radical clique stopped teasing her so much. She was starting to be known as George's woman. She accepted the prestigious position. Though her feelings were hazy. She accepted his criticism of her family, ideals,

and reading matter. She listened to him for hours, fascinated, though she had little sense of the being behind the face, behind the quick nervous movements. She stopped seeing the other men, "the force-fed fraternity clan" as George called them. Only when he began peeling her clothes off, as one peels a fig, did she resist, convulsively close, arms and legs drawn up around her. In that moment, it seemed, no one could enter her. There was no room and she wouldn't let any part of herself be obliterated to make room.

Jody smiled, remembering. She hauled herself out of the pew, scraping her belly on the arm rest as she turned. By the door, underneath a rack of pamphlets on Christian marriage and parenthood, a marble holy water font. Her arms stretched out automatically, but then, as her fingers touched the cool water, she caught herself. She wiped her fingers on her jacket.

Outside, the wind blew colder. Trudging towards her room--a small living bedroom with smaller dark kitchen branching off from it--she realized how chilled she was. Aching to the marrow of her bones. The streets were empty, desolate in the greyness of late November. She tried to walk faster.

How many times had she fought him off? He'd withdraw with a pouting look, but it never took him very long before he was trying again. She'd grown so tired of

it all. Until one day, she had said yes, instead of no, and began taking off her clothes. There had been nothing of what she expected in it. Lying in her four-postered, pink-ruffled bed. Such gentle undulations. Controlled thrusts. A silent shattering. With no hint of sweat or blood. As if a breeze rather than a man had taken her.

When he entered her, the part he destroyed was her trust, her faith. All her life, she'd been lied to. They'd built an act as simple and pleasant as diving into a swimming pool up into a magical gesture, both sacramental and damning. The scales they'd made dropt from her eyes. Their life, their values, even their pleasure was twisted. (A memory surfaced, after years of repression. The sound of her mother's "No, no" behind the wall, like the whine of a frightened animal. The dark bruises on her mother's arm the next day.)

Holding her nose, she dragged herself up the stairs, then down the long corridor lined by black numbered doors. The musty, closed smell always made her queasy. She had to let go of her nose to search in her purse for the keys. She tried to breathe through her mouth. She was standing there mouth ajar, when the door opened and George pulled her in.

He'd finally come to visit. He'd been waiting an hour. The landlady, reluctantly, had let him in. At first, instead of a kiss he held her by the shoulders and

looked at her. "When there was still time, you should have gone to that doctor Maureen recommended. But you started babbling about the life you were carrying. Stupid, fucking hangups. Religious claptrap."

"It was a difficult time."

He touched her awkwardly. "It's just seeing you like this . . . alone. How have you been?"

"O.K. I suppose. What can you expect? As you say, you know how it is. A drag . . . I walk to the sea for excitement. I . . . I read. Mainly I sit around."

He kissed her even more awkwardly then he had touched her. (As if she was a child.) "I can see how you would . . . . Does anyone write besides me?"

"Elena."

"She can write?"

"Why not?"

"I saw Victoria the other day. She'd just been to visit her. She said she was improving."

"Bitch. After she helped send her there, with her voodoo dolls and pins."

"You don't believe in that stuff?"

"She is getting better. You can tell from the letters. They really are getting more clear. She seems to be finding a sense of self. A pride . . ."

"Freaky place to find it."

"Nightmarish."

"No one else writes?"

"Who do you expect? Your friends? I never made it as myself in that group. I reflected a bit of your glory. That's all. Not that I care. Hell, I do but . . ." She busied herself with making jasmine tea.

"Why don't you come back with me?"

"Like this?" She pointed to her stomach, so alien to her in its massiveness.

"You are sort of swollen."

"That's what happens."

"I mean, all over." Displacing books and stuffed animals, he sank into the farthest corner of her unmade bed, wrapping his black, patched cloak around him. "Swollen." He retreated farther into his cloak, as if disgusted. "Your skin seems lifeless."

Jody poured the boiling water into the pot, spilling it over the sides, narrowly missing her hand.

"Jody, it hurts me to see you like this." George grabbed her shaking hand as she passed him his cup.

"I feel as if I'm dying." She looked sadly down at him and her imprisoned hand. "Slowly, as if the--as if it's sapping my life so it can live. Or as if it's not a child at all but an expanding stone or a sickness that will eat me until I'm only a shell. It's devouring my emotions, anyway. I don't care about anything anymore . . ." She stopped abruptly and went to sit at the opposite end of the room with her fragrant cup of tea.

"Even like this, you can come back with me. Why

not? You should have never left. I can't understand why you insisted on going off on your own, accepting money from your parents, after . . . Are you so hung up, you're ashamed--is that it?

"George . . ."

His eyes softened and reached out to her but physically he withdrew further into his cloak. "It'll be over soon and then, you'll be coming back. We were happy, weren't we? It'll be all right again."

"I'm not going to just give it away."

George began chewing on the edges of his moustache. "Well, you can't keep it, for Christ sake."

"I want it."

"How could we fit a kid into our lives? We have much more important concerns. We could get married, if you really wanted to--but kids? They mean two o'clock feedings, sanitation, ordered lives. You can't just get up and go whenever you want to. They suck you into looking for security, a house, a mortgage--the whole bloody, fucking mess."

"They don't have to . . ."

"Jody, what's wrong with you? Don't you remember our ideals and all we worked for?"

"You keep saying 'Why did you leave? Why don't you come back?' As if everything had been right and all the bitterness between us had never happened."

"I had to get after you. You were getting slack."

"All of you got after me. And I got sick of it. Like when Joe criticized me for having a horse because it's private property. Or when Ron was scandalized because I liked the Beatles or when you started yelling at me for eating a grape by mistake. Two years without a grape. It was in a restaurant too. The pettiness of it all."

"Think of the poor Chicanos. I'm sure the whole thing wasn't petty to them." George picked up his wide-brimmed black hat that had fallen on the floor beside him and put it on. "That wasn't the root of what was wrong." His eyes glowed under the brim of his hat, reminding her suddenly of Strider in Lord of the Rings, The Wanderer who was not lost, the unknown Prince born to reestablish the rule of peace. Her heart expanded to fill the space between them, to embrace him silently, respectfully.

She took a long sip of tea and stared at the bottom of the cup, trying not to look at him, until she had mastered her emotion. "I find it difficult to be fanatical. I'm not cut out for sainthood."

"Sainthood!" An expression of vexation crossed George's face as he stood up to deposit his empty cup. "I'm not asking for sainthood. Just a little dedication."

"To the revolution?" She asked coldly, looking up at him and thinking that, after all, he wasn't tall enough

to be a true Strider.

"What else is there?"

"Your revolution isn't mine."

"Ah," he watched her, hostile, "when you came back from Paris you were right up with us. Then you started getting stoned. All the time. I would keep warning you. Dope is counter-revolutionary. It leads you right back to the degenerate, individualistic, bourgeois stance where you started from. But you didn't listen. You went right ahead."

Her love for him churned with the confusion of the past months. She felt faint, but in the midst of the chaos within her, she felt a tiny point of certainty.

"I have no place in your revolution. You want dedication--dedication to be nothing. To keep me making sandwiches and worshipping the ground you walk on. You don't want me beside you fighting. You want me following orders."

"Jody, you're a woman."

"And I'm doing just what a woman's supposed to, aren't I?" she was screaming but she couldn't moderate her voice. "Creating. Creating. Yes. The revolution, the future, grace. It's all in here." She pointed to her stomach. "My baby is going to be the freest, happiest baby . . . My . . ."

"Jo, stop it." George grabbed her shoulders, worried by her hysteria but angry nevertheless.

George . . ."

She had fallen in love with George as George. She had been happy, delighting in his nervous quirks, fears, dreams, anything that was him. And he had loved her as Jody. Their lovemaking had been the easiest, most perfect thing she'd known--so perfect that he'd become for her more and less than he was. He became man. And she for him became woman. When they had gone to a film or a play, whether the heroine was a bitch, nun, whore, or mother didn't matter, she was a facet of Jody in his eyes. Whether Rosemary, Candy or Bathsheba, he would squeeze her hand and whisper "just like you." George had a vessel in which he poured his inner self but she could find no entrance to his or any other vessel. She became the general, not only in his eyes, and the particular--her inner self--had been lost.

The sea lay waiting, restless and immense. She winced when the water touched her but she had come to be anointed. The icy waves, like monstrous arms, caressed, then embraced her, recognizing her uniqueness. "Depart unclean spirit." She grew numb, happy to surrender yet still spitting out the bitter water forced into her mouth. "Receive the salt of wisdom."

Darkness began to eat away her consciousness. "Renounce . . ."

"Go in peace." The sheets of the narrow hospital bed were rough. She spent the days staring at the blank ceilings. She was empty and, in spite of all, she missed the child that should be resting in her arms and feeding from her breasts. Instead, her innards had expelled a stone-carved miniature of George, red and cold.

A scene, detached from her memories, like a film loop, ran over and over again. The priest, his face red and roughened by ill-temper and drink, turning from the altar to the congregation, raising his hands in ceremonial salutation.

"Will You not, O God, give us life?"

The response, uncertain, uneven.

"And shall not Your people rejoice in You?"

BLACK AND WHITE

"More coffee?" The waitress was a Chicano girl of about eighteen, but already dry, tight, emaciated. Her extended arm, a knobbly twig that seemed ready to snap from the weight of the coffeepot.

Anything to fill in the time. "Please." Jody smiled handing her back the breakfast plate streaked with yolk and sausage fat. "It was good." The girl didn't smile.

A squirt of cream. The whole package was too much. Sugar--the bowl of cubes was gone. Jody turned to the table on her right, crowded with a gang of blacks.

"Could I have the sugar please?" They hadn't heard her. Their talk was loud and rhythmic but she couldn't quite understand what they were saying. She took a deep breath. "Sugar, please!" Immediately, they were quiet, staring at her. One, with a broken nose and an orange crocheted hat perched on his afro, handed her the bowl.

She would have liked to say more than "thanks" but what? Soul on Ice or Giovanni's Room? They didn't look like they read much. What injustices have you suffered lately? A bit personal for a start. The future of the

black nation in America? Would they like that, black nation? It would be good if she could talk to them about class and racism and why the Black Panthers were wrong. Workers of the world unite, and all that. But how? And why should they talk to her? To them she must look just like any other Mrs. Whitey. She couldn't start by declaring she was unprejudiced, a good guy and not even American. No.

Smiling, she looked up at the public phone, hanging on the wall opposite her. It would probably be hours before Ian was through with his physical and called. She stood up and walked past the long counter to the door. Outside, it was raining. The streets were deserted, bordered by refuse and dingy, little shops where no one ever seemed to enter. Not the place for a walk. Besides, if something went wrong and he phoned before she expected him to . . . So, she was stuck, the only woman, besides the waitress, and the only white, besides the cook, in a dive, in the middle of Oakland.

"It's been nice knowing you." That's what she said when Ian first told her he was going back to the U.S. to face the draft evasion charges. "It was good while it lasted."

"You don't think its a good idea?"

"I think you're nuts."

"I want to make my protest, my way."

"Change the system from within? You don't believe that bullshit do you? The system is rotten--rots everything in it. You have to stay out, stay away. Going back means acknowledging their authority. Don't you see? Compromising means they have you."

She hadn't convinced him. He'd convinced her to go down with him and stay while he went through his trial. "You're between jobs anyway. Besides, I love you, and need you. You give me strength." Fatal words that have ruined many a woman. Not that she was the type who was easily dominated. A few months later and she would have resisted. She was exactly at that point of finding him indispensible. Past the first flush of passion (being in heat, she called it), she knew what pleasures his body offered. A few more months of gorging herself on him and she might have been satiated. As it was, she was still addicted to the particular, private caresses they had evolved. No one else could offer exactly those lips and the way of kissing that went with them. Or that patch of hair. Or . . .

A sudden blast of music from the jukebox, insistent and loud, changed the tone of the coffeeshop to something slightly more nervous, more hysterical. The man with the broken nose was busily pushing jukebox buttons. Standing up, he seemed about six feet five inches with another six inches of hair.

"Mama told me not to come" sang the record. Her foot and shoulders began, unconsciously, tapping out the rhythm. Though she had never seen them, she could imagine the group recording. A row of six men, all dressed in white sequined bodysuits, all moving in exact unison, twirling in complex patterns.

> This ain't the way to have fun--yeah
> This ain't the way to have fun.

She hadn't had "fun" since she left Canada. Everything had gone well, as Ian's lawyer had predicted. The judge had dismissed the charges against Ian on the condition he let himself be inducted into the army. But she was always tensed, expecting disaster to strike. The restlessness in the California air promised it. When, in court, the defendent before Ian tried to escape and was shot in the leg, she wasn't surprised. It even calmed her, momentarily. The lawyer insisted nothing could go wrong during induction: Ian would file for conscientious objector status and it would be granted. It was only a question of time. She didn't believe him. Once within the grasp of the monster, military machine, Ian was doomed. That's why she had delayed going back to Edmonton until she saw him safely through the first steps.

"Mind you, I think I've done my bit. Christmas break's nearly over. Time for work. I'm nearly drained in the love and support line," she'd told him the night before, lying in his arms on the motel room floor, after

a particularly energetic bout of lovemaking.

"You could stay a few more days. Come see Fort Ord. It's a beautiful area."

"Not for a nice, Canadian Marxist like me."

"Monterey--Carmel--marvelous."

"I'll talk to trees? Or hippies trying to stone their way back to nature? You're going to be busy marching around like a wind-up doll. No. One more day and then, I rush back to Edmonton."

She need not have wasted those words. They both knew she was going back and even Ian agreed it was best. She talked because she had the feeling that her presence somehow protected him from the monster machine. That she was a shield against the streak of frenzy in the California air. Leaving him was exposing him. "I have to go. There's that chance for the videotaping job."

Butting out her third cigarette (It wasn't eleven yet. If she kept it up, she'd have a sore throat tonight.), she instinctively glanced up at the phone. A slight, pale young man in a yellow, suede suit was using it. The suede was well worn and his rear end was adorned with several bright patches. She opened her big leather purse and pulled out a paperback, The Loved and the Lost by Morley Callahan--one of a collection of Canadian novels she'd brought down with her. They were the opposite of frenzy; they stood calm, simple and fatalistic against the

California world--so crammed with conflicting stimuli and movement. Once, she tried to drive on one of the freeways; the number of cars and lanes, plus the speed frightened her. Laughing, Ian had taken her to a restaurant for ice cream to calm her. But it had been no better. The foyer featured an enormous fountain, highlighted by different coloured flashing lights and loud Frank Sinatrish music. After that, she needed a passage describing a prairie sunset before she could focus on anything.

The phone rang. She nearly knocked over the flimsy table getting to it, but the voice on the other end wasn't Ian's. It was deep and black. "Candybar there?" The gang around the table had moved. They were arranged around the pool table in the back in various attitudes of play. The broken-nosed one with the orange and blue towel draped like a loin cloth, stood up from the cue over which he was bent.

"He ain't here and he ain't gonna be here."

"Noo ma'am. He's too busy too day. Ain't that right, Candybar?" This from one with a green, wool hat. They all froze in their actions, like a still photo, and laughed. "Noo Ma'am."

"Excuse me." She pulled herself away from the plucky heroine flying down the snowy Montreal street without boots. The young man in suede was leaning over the table. "You answered the phone before. I'm waiting for a call, so I thought. Name is Watkins, Kevin

Watkins . . . in case it rings again." His face fine-boned, a rather ragged mustache, very carefully combed and in place hair.

"All right. I'll call you."

"I'll be there, by the door."

"Fine."

She started to read, to almost pick up the rhythm of the jazz of St. Antoine's, the black nightclub of Montreal, but the rock was too loud. It drowned out the more subtle music, so far away in years and miles. The pool players had three favorites, all similar, that they listened to over and over again.

Another face, topped with a green, wool hat, thrust itself into her vision. "You wanna play a song--just go push the buttons." She must have stared at him a bit stupidly because he repeated what he'd said. Actually, she was thinking of the texture of his skin. She'd never seen a black so close up before. Though his head was handsome, his skin looked rough and pimply. She'd always thought that black skin would be as smooth as flower petals. "Go ahead."

"Oh, thank you, it's very kind of you." His teeth did fulfill her cliche expectations. They were white and strong-looking just like the pictures.

There were only two songs on the entire jukebox that weren't soul. By the Time I Get to Phoenix and MacArthur Park. Though they weren't the type of song she

would usually choose, she pressed the buttons for them. The change from driving beat and agonized wails would be soothing.

When she got back to her table, Kevin Watkins was sitting there. "Hi."

"Hello."

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

"Of course not."

"You're stuck here too?"

"Yes."

"I was gonna enlist today. Was all ready to go. Forgot one measly piece of paper. Now I gotta get ahold of my old lady. And I can't. Phoned everywhere. Left this number."

"I'm just waiting for a friend who's being inducted."

"Oh. How long is he signing up for?"

"He was drafted." She explained the situation.

Keven kept nodding in response, as if he already knew. He seemed very nervous. He lit cigarette after cigarette. His hands shook. He moved his head in quick, sharp movements. He'd already been in the army for five years, out for one year and was going to enlist for another five. After that, he'd probably to too old to start anything. He might just stay in, being halfway to retirement and all.

As he told her this, By the Time I Get to Phoenix

finally began playing. It was a tortured, soul version, sounding the same as all the other records that had been playing. Jody let out a little giggle before she could stop herself. "Too much."

"That I'd enlist again?"

"That too."

"They're going to send me to Italy."

"There are other ways of getting there." His long, thin tobacco-stained fingers played with the ends of his mustache.

"For you maybe . . . I didn't want to reenlist. Not at all. This last year, I haven't been able to find one steady job. Nothing--except stuff that pays chickenfeed. Dishwashing. Gaspumping. It's been tough. Rocky. Rocky all around." He moved his head from side to side. His hair stayed perfectly in place. "Janie, she's my old lady, Janie and me, we'd be yelling at each other all the time. Over a beer or her new stockings. We were in this teeny trailer and the kid, I got this fifteen month old kid, would cry and scream when we screamed. She finally packed up and moved in with her sister. Said she wouldn't come back unless I enlisted. Said she wanted food on the table and a proper roof over her head."

"What do you want?"

"To be a drummer . . . But that's not too likely now." His mouth was tight. He stretched it into a smile which just avoided being a grimace. "They put me back in

at my old rank--staff sergeant, that's pretty good pay--about $450 a month. And a bonus of $8,000 for reenlisting. You can't beat that."

"Do you want your wife back?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "We've been together so long. It seems rather empty when she's not there. Habit, you know how it is."

"I do." But she was never going to let herself sink into that, not again. Each word, each look used to draw blood, but to make an end of it--more deadly. "It's addictive."

"Janie's probably right. I went into the army in the first place after high school, because I couldn't find a job. They look after you--cheap cigarettes, free medical care."

"And your drumming?"

"I was in this group. We were really getting our shit together. But the gigs weren't as many as I needed. Maybe if I held on . . . waited . . . who knows? maybe someone important would have heard us. Man, we were good--outasight--but now . . . still, Janie didn't like me being out late all the time."

"You don't look like a drummer."

He smiled a more real smile. With one swift motion, he peeled off his hair, exposing a new mass of straight, long hair. "Ta-da. The real me."

"Oh," Jody clapped her hands. "Much better."

"Got up this morning and couldn't do a thing with it." They laughed together. He lit a cigarette, then passed it to her, a cavalier gesture which made them laugh again. He was so small, so thin. His shoulders were broad but she sensed that the skin was pulled tight over the bones.

"What do you do, up there in Canada?"

"Oh, various things. I've been a counsellor. I'm getting into media now." To be able to see his shoulders, to trace the pattern of bones with one's tongue.

"Wow." He was actually impressed and that embarrased her. He began talking of his adventures with the band--handling drunks at dances, driving home from an obscure town stoned, trying to cut a record--but she really didn't listen. Managing to smile and nod automatically, she was obsessed with examining his face, his hands, his shoulders. She'd felt a sort of gentleness towards him since they'd started talking, but it hadn't prepared her for this sudden flare of violent attraction. There was something so familiar, so right in the way he moved, his expressions, his nervousness. To take his shaking hand and still it with a kiss in center palm. Not that she would. The disconnection of the desire to any action, the impossibility of any fulfillment, added a special, sweet ache. But, she couldn't comprehend the welling of tenderness for a strange insignificant young man. The feeling had the same plaintive, yearning melody as an

Italian record Elena had given her once. Jody couldn't understand the words but the singer's voice, caressing that certain conjunction of notes, expressed something she responded to. She asked Elena not to translate the words. The actual meaning seemed bound to be less than she felt.

Suddenly, he stopped talking, his cigarette frozen half way to his mouth. "Jesus Christ, she came." A short woman with a bland pretty face, very freckled, and layered hair, very backcombed, approached the table. She didn't sit down. She slapped down an official-looking piece of paper.

"You were supposed to phone."

"Mavis told me what you wanted."

He glanced at the paper rapidly, then tossed it across the table at her. "Well, you brought the wrong, fucking thing."

For a brief second, her features sagged into an expression of tiredness and defeat. It was so out of proportion with the situation that Jody realized how difficult the last year must have been for her. "I ain't gonna stand here and listen to you bitch. The kid's in the car."

With a melodramatic sigh, Kevin followed his wife out of the cafe, wig in hand. Jody called the waitress, who was standing on the edge of the pool table area, flirting with the tall, loin-clothed man, and ordered a coke. She was settling back into her book when the phone rang.

It was for a "Cadillac," who turned out to be actually not there. She'd hardly read a sentence when the man who'd offered her the two free songs was sitting in the chair opposite her.

"What's that there book you keep sticking your nose into?"

"It's called The Loved and the Lost. It's Canadian."

"What's it about?"

She was glad the chance for conversation had arisen. But, as she went over the main plot in her mind (innocent girl--degraded--hated and eventually destroyed by both black and white societies for loving blacks too disinterestedly, too openly) she felt suddenly embarrassed. It would seem so sentimental, so fake of her, to be reading such a book here. "It's the usual tragic love story--man tries to save the woman he loves and fails."

The man smiled looking down at the cover, featuring the outline of a negro with a blank-eyed, white woman imprinted on his cheek while the tiny figure of a defeated-looking man rested on her cheek.

Jody found herself flushing in a way she hadn't for years. She was just about to try to say something else, anything, when Kevin returned. The other man straightened up and, with a long, hard look at Kevin, drifted back to the pool table.

"I left a message for her to phone and what does

she do? Come with the wrong paper. She never learns, that woman."

"She must have thought she was doing it the quickest way."

He looked disgruntled, his hair falling over his eyes. "Sometimes, she sits and thinks up things to do that'll bug me."

"Don't be silly. You're starting to sound like a letter to Dear Abby."

"Disgusting, isn't it?" He laughed tightly.

"How long have you been married?"

"Four years. Since just after I got home from 'Nam."

"Vietnam?" She'd never met anyone who'd been there before. "You fought there?"

"'67-'68. Heavy period."

She examined his smooth, young face for some sign of the experiences he must have had. There was none.

"What do you think of the peace treaty?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Old Charlie Cong isn't going to give up. And neither will Uncle Sugar," in answer to her questioning glance, he added "the U.S. It'll just be sneakier. It has too many economic interests. And if the war does stop, it'll start somewhere else. So much of the economy is based on defense." He ran his fingers through his hair and the gesture touched off another well of tenderness. But this time more than familiarity

accompanied it.

George. Of course. The face, the body, the way of moving were a slightly out of focus picture. George.

How many years ago since they were first lovers? Since they'd lived together in that tiny, book-filled room on the second floor of the co-op? Such a time of discovery! All the old pillars that had supported her, family, religion, country, crumbling. But the energy thrust of the new vision, the Marxian grid he gave her on which everything could be measured. The books, full of such dry, dull pedantic language but so intoxicating. Little explosions going off inside her and taking her breath away.

So long ago. The almost mystic sense of community George had introduced her to was stifled now under all inter-left squabbling, the erosion of the united front of struggle. The sixties, the time of hope, gone; though "why must pre-history be so long" was one of George's favorite jokes even then.

And George gone too. Living in a luxurious high-rise in Toronto working for Time. Leaving her with a shadow of their white, doll-like, dead child over their good times, so that she'd repressed--blocked out--all memories of their love until a stranger forced her to remember.

"Is anything wrong?" Kevin touched her hand

lightly. "You looked freaked out."

"No . . . no, I'm fine. I was just thinking about Vietnam and all the protest marches I was in and how I cared. But I was never threatened. No brothers, cousins or classmates killed or maimed. I mean, I knew a lot of evaders, like Ian, but it always seemed a blessing for them. Getting out of a dying society and all." Glancing at Kevin and seeing he wasn't really following her, she waved her hand. "Forget it."

"But your friend came back."

"It's hard . . . getting past what we came from . . . anyway it's temporary. He's going back to Canada when everything's straightened out."

"'Nam was no picnic, but you got used to it."

"Were you infantry?"

"A gunner on the copters." He pushed back his hair with the hand holding the cigarette. "It was kind of fun, flying around, tearing up the land, watching the long, red flames shoot out, firing at the little coloured boats on the river till they sank." He spoke calmly, more calmly than he had since she'd begun talking to him, as if he was describing last night's supper. He smiled, George's smile. She couldn't speak. The split between the man she saw before and the confident man before her now was too confusing. The phone rang. She didn't move to answer it. She sat and stared at him, split herself by conflicting impulses. The way he turned his head, his physical presence

still stirred her. "Jody Carmichael." The black at the phone called her name down towards the front, as if it could be anyone but her.

It was Ian. He'd found a waiting room in the induction center. As quickly as she could she gathered up her coat, book and purse. She touched Kevin's hand lightly as she said goodbye. He was looking a bit disappointed, but she was glad to get away. Next door at the center, a sergeant was hassling Ian about his refusal to take the loyalty oath. The sergeant consulted his superior who, in turn, consulted his and so on, until someone, four ranks up, stuck his neck out and admitted they couldn't force Ian to take the oath. Jody waited, reading outdated copies of Newsweek. She couldn't face the novel. By the time the problem was straightened out, it was too late for Ian to finish being inducted. They told him to come back the next morning at seven. On the way out, they bumped into Kevin, waiting at the door for his wife to pick him up. He hadn't finished processing in time either.

Jody introduced the men to each other. Kevin immediately invited them to a going-away party that evening in his trailer. "It's tight but its usually a good scene."

Jody answered gently, "We'd love to come but we have to visit an old friend of Ian's. We haven't been able to see him yet."

"O.K." He turned to Ian, who was looking nervous. "Don't get so tied up in knots, you've got your rights. Remember that."

Ian hardly answered and didn't even smile when Kevin wished him luck. "Who the hell was he?" he asked as they left the building and started down the wet, empty streets to the car.

"He was also waiting in the coffee shop. You didn't need to be so rude. He meant to be reassuring. He was very, oh, open."

"I don't know how you dig them up.".

"Snob."

At the motel, there was a colour television. Jody switched it on while Ian was in the shower. It was a Bob Hope Special--his annual Christmas tour--something she would have switched off in Canada, after perhaps a sneer and a few obscenities at both the entertainers and the troops. This time, as the camera panned over the massive audience of soldiers, she found herself fascinated.

When Ian emerged naked from the bathroom, she was crying.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know . . . I was watching them and they looked so young and I just felt sad, all of a sudden."

"California must be getting to you, you feeling sorry for American soldiers."

"They're not in control of their lives."

"Are we?"

"No."

She looked up at the TV screen. Open, blank faces, thousands of them, all focused on Miss Tennessee panting double entendres into the microphone. She felt the tears welling up again. "We must confront vague ideas with clear . . . We must." (She tried to smile.) "Oh, when the revolution comes . . ."

"Yes," he said, taking her into his arms for perhaps the last time.